

Who Shall Judge?

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"Taffy watched her with a tense feeling at his heart
(*see page 205*).

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- "Taffy watched her with a tense feeling at his
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- "She turned as the gate swung back . . . and
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WHO SHALL JUDGE ?

CHAPTER I

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

RUTH LONGTON lay dying with the burden of a great wrong weighing heavily on her conscience. She knew she would not get better, and, indeed, she was not sorry the end was so near. She was weary of the long struggle and longed for rest, and yet she shrank from facing the unknown with this sense of guilt upon her heart. If she could only make confession—tell all the truth—she might die easier. It was with this desire she battled as life ebbed slowly to its close.

More than twenty years previously she and her husband had been tempted beyond their strength; at any rate, they had yielded to the temptation. Perhaps they had not greatly desired to overcome it; perhaps they had not realised the full meaning of their conduct. It is not always easy in moments of tension and excitement to gauge the moral significance of an action.

The temptation came to them suddenly and unexpectedly. It came to them also in a very subtle way. It appealed to their pride, their selfishness, their ambition. It made a further appeal to the deep

and passionate desire which most parents have, to do the best they can for their own.

They had two children to care for—one their own, the other the child of Henry Discombe, who had gone out to South America to engineer a railway. Discombe's wife had died in giving birth to this little son. For two years the baby struggled bravely with the attentions of a wet-nurse, an old house-keeper and the officious interference of sundry neighbours. How he lived through it all was a miracle. Had he been less enamoured of life or possessed a less vigorous constitution he would have followed his mother before the first year was out. But little Ralph refused to succumb either to neglect or to injudicious feeding. How much longer he might have survived no one can say.

When Henry Discombe received the offer of a seven years' engagement in South America he asked Ruth Longton, whom he had known all his life, to mother his little son. At first she hesitated. She had a child of her own of just the same age, and he was "one body's work," as she often declared to her husband. If she had two to look after how would she be able to do anything at all?

But the offer of a hundred a year was an inducement too great to be resisted. Peter Longton did not hesitate a moment. "Of course we will take him," he said with a flush on his face. "Think of the money, Ruth. Why, it will set us on our feet. The lad'll cost nothing for the first few years. In a farm-house one small mouth will make no difference at all."

"But the responsibility, Peter!" she urged. "If anything should happen to him!"

"Oh, nothing is going to happen," he said a little impatiently. "He's a healthy little chap by all accounts; and besides, he and Robin will be company for each other."

"We could easily do with the money," she answered thoughtfully.

"It would be the saving of us," he chimed in. "You know that we are worse off now than when we were wed twelve years ago."

"We've had sickness in the house, Peter," she answered with a sigh, "and two small funerals. We can't be against such things."

"It's been rough luck on us all the same," he retorted. "In fact, there never is any luck for farmers in this country. What with bad seasons and high rents and no end of rates and taxes, one might as well be a toad under a harrow. It's the folk who do nothing who get all the pickings."

She smiled a little plaintively. "It's no use girding at our betters, Peter. We are where God Almighty placed us."

Peter turned and spat into the open chimney with a gesture of scorn. "Betters be hanged!" he snorted. "But let us get back to the boy."

"Oh, we'll take him, of course," she answered mildly. "It's too good a chance to be thrown away."

"Now you are talking sensibly, Ruth," and his face brightened.

"But you must not forget, Peter, that all the responsibility will fall on me."

"Nay, we share and share alike," he laughed; "the good and the bad. This is our one bit of luck since we were married."

So Henry Discombe's child came, and proved on

the whole tractable and easy to manage. He was just beginning to walk alone and to lisp words. He took kindly to his new surroundings and appeared greatly to enjoy having a companion of his own age. There were quarrels, of course, which sometimes developed into free fights. There were desperate attempts at robbery with violence. Neither of them possessed a toy that the other did not want to steal, and during these scrimmages there were generally fierce howlings which quickly brought Ruth Longton on the scene.

On the whole, however, there was not much to complain of. If the little stranger came in for most of the blame it was not to be wondered at. Mothers are not always impartial judges, and Ruth Longton was slow to see any fault in her own child.

She was never unkind, however. Henry Discombe's son might not be the equal of her own—though in truth in those early days there was not a pin to choose between them. Still, for the sake of the dead mother and the father beyond the seas she was ready to show great pity and forbearance, and to regard leniently faults that were common to all children.

Also there was the financial side of the question, of which her husband never allowed her to lose sight. "The boy is paying the rent," Peter would say sententiously, "and if anything should happen to him we should be back again in the old ditch."

It was a sultry autumn afternoon when something did happen. The children had been left playing together in the garden. Ruth was unusually busy with household duties. Her one maidservant had left her that morning to take up service in a

distant town, and the new girl whom she had engaged was not expected to arrive till late in the evening.

That either of the children might stray away and get lost did not occur to her—they were much more likely to fall asleep in the warm, drowsy air. The afternoon sped away rapidly. She had so many things to do and was so eager to get them done that she did not notice the flight of time. Once only she thought of the children, and then she gave a little sigh of relief that they were not quarrelling. The house was very quiet. Now and then the cluck of a hen or the sudden quack-quack of a duck floated in through the open window, but these were the only sounds that broke the silence. Peter was busy ploughing in a distant field and would keep at it till dusk.

She was standing at the kitchen table crimping a meat-and-potato pasty, when she became conscious that the silence was unusual. The window was wide open, giving view of a corner of the farmyard, and not far away a tall sycamore threw its shadow. She looked up with a little start and listened, but not a leaf stirred anywhere. Even the fowls had ceased to cluck. The quietness was almost oppressive.

"I wonder what those children are up to?" she said to herself. "No mischief, I hope," and she turned toward the door which opened into the passage and listened again.

"I'd better see what they are doing," she reflected, and, pushing the completed pasty from her, she made for the front door.

The front garden was two-thirds orchard, and lying in the shadow of a pear tree she found her own boy fast asleep; but Henry Discombe's child was nowhere to be seen.

She was not alarmed, however. He was a sturdy little fellow, and might easily wander to the extreme end of the garden, or into the fields should he find the gate open. In five minutes she was back again looking a little anxious.

"Smut," she said, waking her own child, "where's Taffy?"

Smut and Taffy were the names the late maid had given them, for why no one knew exactly; but the names stuck and usurped the place of Ralph and Robin.

Smut rubbed his grimy fists into his eyes and then looked blankly at his mother.

"Don't you know where Taffy is?" she asked anxiously.

"Taffy 'ere," Smut replied, opening his eyes wide and looking slowly round him.

"Taffy isn't here," she answered quickly. "I can't see him anywhere."

Smut only smiled at this announcement and started for the house.

Ruth ran to the gate that led into the road—it stood ajar, leaving plenty of room for a child to pass through. She looked along the road, then ran into the farmyard and peeped into the stable and cartshed.

"Taffy!" she called, her voice rising clear and vibrant. "Taffy, where are you?"

By this time she was thoroughly alarmed, and began to make a more systematic search.

The farm buildings stood five hundred yards back from the highway, and there was not another house within half a mile.

She scanned every nook and corner of the yard,

looked into every outbuilding, then back again to the orchard and garden, then down the long, narrow road till she reached the king's highway, then out across the fields at a wild rate till she came upon her husband.

"Peter," she gasped, "Taffy's lost. I can't find him anywhere."

"Lost?" he exclaimed, pulling his horses to a sudden stop.

"I left the boys playing in the garden," she went on, "and when I went to look at them Taffy was missing."

"And where's Smut?" he questioned anxiously.

"Oh, I'd forgotten him," and she turned suddenly and began to run toward the house.

Peter got out the nosebags and hung them over his horses' ears, then followed his wife.

"Boy can't have got lost," he meditated. "There's no place to lose him in. Most likely he's dropped asleep somewhere. Ruth's terribly nervous."

He quite expected by the time he reached the house to be met by his wife with a smile upon her face and the children clinging to her skirts.

He found her instead hugging Smut to her breast and big tears running down her cheeks.

"Oh, Peter, what shall we do?" she exclaimed. "I've looked everywhere."

"He can't have strayed down into the moors, surely?" he said with downcast eyes and an anxious note in his voice.

"I've thought of that myself," she answered with a little gasp. "Hadn't we better go there at once before it gets dark?"

"You say you've looked everywhere else?"

"Everywhere that I can think of, and I've called to him till I'm hoarse."

"I always keep the gate shut," he said musingly; "but then he might get between the bars, and—and——"

"And what, Peter?"

"Well, I hardly like to think of it. There's the mill leat, as you know, and a good many deep pools beyond, and a child unfortunately hasn't the sense of a calf."

"If he's tried to cross the leat, Peter, we shall never see him alive again."

He did not reply, but turned at once and made for the moors. Ruth followed, carrying Smut in her arms.

They searched for track of little feet, but none was visible. Beyond the gate Peter turned to the right, Ruth to the left.

"If I find anything I'll halloo," he said. "You do the same."

It had grown dark when they met again, and further search was hopeless. Peter looked blankly into his wife's eyes and for some time was silent. When at length he spoke it was with marked hesitancy.

"This will mean everything to us, Ruth, unless——unless——" Then he paused and looked off into the darkness.

She did not reply. She could not trust herself to speak; her heart was too full.

"If we were better off it wouldn't matter so much," he went on in the same slow, hesitating way; "but with things as they are——" Then he stopped again.

They reached the house in silence, and Ruth laid Smut in a corner of the sofa. Peter took out his tobacco pouch and began to fill his pipe.

"You think he's dead, Peter?" Ruth questioned in a whisper.

"I fear so—I fear so."

"And I shall get all the blame," she moaned. "Oh, why is it that women have always the most to bear?"

"Nobody is going to blame you or anybody else," he said tartly. "We've done our duty. Besides, nobody would think we were such fools as to kill the goose that lays the golden egg."

"No, not kill, Peter! But people may think I did not take sufficient care."

"Why not say it's our own child?" he said suddenly.

"What?" she exclaimed with a gasp.

"There'd be no harm done," he went on defiantly. "We'd get the allowance as usual. We'd see our own child grow up well cared for, educated at the best schools, dressed like a gentleman, mixing with——"

"And ashamed of his own parents!" she interjected with flashing eyes.

"What difference would that make?" he went on boldly. "You know as well as I do that you'd like to see your son a gentleman. And he'll never be that if we have to bring him up on what I can make out of the farm."

"I see all that, Peter; but—but it wouldn't be right," she answered in milder tones.

"That's just as you look at it," he said doggedly. "It 'ud save Henry Discombe a big heartache and

you from any resentment he might feel. Me it 'ud save from bankruptcy and our boy from poverty all his life. And nobody'd be harmed, as far as I can see."

"But the money, Peter?"

"Discombe would never feel it. Besides, we deserve something. Think of what we are suffering now and shall suffer."

"It seems an easy way out," she said after a long pause, "and I should like our boy to have a chance in life."

"And you don't want to be blamed for not properly looking after Discombe's boy?"

"I don't, Peter."

"Nor me in the workhouse when I'm old."

"Hush," she said. "We shall both be spared that, I hope."

"Not if we fling away our chance when it comes to us," he protested doggedly.

She dropped her eyes and was silent. The temptation was so subtle, the prospect so alluring, that she had no strength to battle against it.

A few minutes later the new servant-maid announced herself, and Peter undertook to explain the situation.

Susan Whip was a sympathetic soul, and shed tears freely. "To think of it," she said feelingly; "but luck always does run that way. If it 'ad only been the other, now."

Peter winced and then suggested that another search should be made with lanterns.

Crowdale Farm was so isolated that it was not until noon the following day that outsiders knew what had happened. When the news at length got

wing it spread rapidly. Ruth came in for a very ocean of sympathy. It was so hard that her child should be taken and the stranger left.

At first she crimsoned to the roots of her hair, she felt so ashamed of the deception. But the path of wrong is "a slippery slope," and the descent was more rapid than even she realised. Hypocrisy is the twin sister of falsehood. Before the day was out she had ceased to blush.

Smut looked wonderingly at all the strange people who came to the house, and, generally speaking, refused to exhibit his conversational powers. The marked attention of so many women was embarrassing; the absence of Taffy made him fretful.

"And this is Henry Discombe's child, is it?" And Smut would try to get away from the intruders. "How like his father he is!" said some. "The image of his mother," said others. "Not a bit like either of them," others protested.

Ruth listened to the comments with not a little foreboding. It had been easy to take the first step on the slippery slope, but already there was no getting back. Not that she wanted to get back; the gain was out of all proportion to the loss. Yet she would have been better pleased if so many women had not taken stock of Smut. It was disquieting to realise that the door had been irrevocably shut; that there was no place left for repentance, however much she might desire it.

CHAPTER II

FROM CHILDHOOD TO MANHOOD

TAFFY was discovered, three days later, staring in at a shop window in the main street of Blakeney. How he got there no one knew—or, if any knew, they kept the knowledge to themselves. Blakeney was six miles away from Crowdale Farm, and Taffy's shoes were scarcely worn at all. His chubby face was very dirty, and there was a white line down either cheek where the tears had strayed. That he had been fed and, in a rough way, cared for there could be no doubt, but who had kidnapped him or for what purpose remained a mystery.

Taffy was too young to give any information, and the more he was questioned, the more bewildered his small brain became. He talked vaguely about gee-gees and puff-puffs; about a naughty man, "who made Taffy cry"; about a dark room, and no bed in it. But nothing that he said led to any genuine clue.

Some suggested that he had been kidnapped out of a spirit of mischief, others, in the hope of a ransom. Most likely he had strayed down to the highway alone. What happened after that was all conjecture.

Ruth and Peter received the tidings of his safety with mingled feelings. They had grown quite reconciled to the idea that they would never see him again alive, and they had mapped out a prosperous

and unclouded future for their own son, in which prosperity they were to have no insignificant part. Hence the resurrection, as it were, of Taffy complicated things.

Moreover, it put a great strain on their ability as actors. They would have to play a difficult part in the eye of a host of spectators; would have to feign an emotion they did not feel. In a general way, they were fond of the child. He was a lovable little fellow even at the worst. Still, he was not their own; and yet they would have to receive him as such, pretend that he was, and exhibit every sign of joy and gratitude at his recovery.

On the whole they played their part with considerable success. Apart from the complications that might arise in the future, they were glad to have the boy back again. Smut had never been himself since Taffy strayed away, and had never ceased to look and call for his companion.

Ruth shed genuine tears. The mother-heart within her was stirred to its depths when the dirty cheeks of the little fellow were pressed close to hers and the soft, chubby arms stole round her neck.

"Bless you," she said brokenly, and she kissed the dirty face till it was almost clean.

After that things went on at the farm as usual—or, rather, they went on better than usual. Peter Longton, having more ready money at his command, was able gradually to increase his stock, with the result that the farm yielded a greater profit than ever before. For once, deviation from the path of right appeared to be justified by results. Nobody had been harmed, from Peter's point of view, while he and his wife and child had considerably

benefited. Of course, the benefit would have been exactly the same—at least, for the first ten years—if they had never determined on the course they had taken.

The wrong began to appear when the time came for Henry Discombe's son to go to a public school. Discombe had married again—a Spanish lady, of considerable wealth, it was said—and he was anxious that his son should have all the educational advantages that England could offer.

Up to this time Smut had fared no better than Taffy. They had both tramped morning by morning to the nearest Board school, more than a mile away, had both shared alike in the matter of pocket money, and had both got their new clothes at the same time. Indeed, Peter could honestly say that up to this point he had done Discombe's son no injustice, except in the matter of name.

But now came the real parting of the ways, and the boy to whom the privileges of wealth belonged would have to remain on a few years longer at the Board school, and then take his place on the farm, and share its drudgery and disappointment.

To be quite fair to Peter, he did not like it. Not being imaginative, he had not prepared himself, as Ruth had done, for the change. He said nothing, however; neither did she. If there was no chance of retracing their steps at the beginning, there was less chance now. The boys had grown up believing that they were what their names declared them to be. Smut spoke of his father abroad, and anticipated the day when he would join him in his South American home. Taffy accepted his lowlier lot with equanimity. He was not envious of his foster

brother. He was generous enough to rejoice in his greater advantages.

Later on, when Smut condescended to visit Crowdale Farm during vacations, Taffy regarded him with somewhat mingled feelings. They were good friends still, but somehow they were getting to have less and less in common.

Taffy did not envy Smut his book-learning, nor his Winchester affectations, nor his fine clothes. But his leisure, his chances of observation, his contact with the outer world, his opportunities of seeing men and things—these things did appeal to Taffy.

Life at Crowdale Farm was slow and exceedingly circumscribed. It moved in the same ruts from month to month and year to year; there was the same rotation of crops without the least variation; the same recurrence of market days and fairs; the same methods that had been in operation for a hundred years.

Peter Longton was as conservative and hide-bound as most British farmers are. He snorted at innovations and vetoed changes. What was good enough for his father and grandfather was good enough for him. Taffy had been touched by the new spirit. He wanted change, not so much of place as of methods. He was eager to try experiments—to give science a chance. But Peter would have none of it. That was what came of book-learning, and attending continuation schools, and dabbling in chemistry and such-like nonsense. Had he not been a farmer all his life, and his father and grandfather before him? And was it likely that anybody could teach him?

Taffy came near to quarrelling with his foster

father sometimes. He was high spirited and impatient of the narrow and unprogressive temper that seemed to hedge him in. He enjoyed those quickening weeks when Smut was at home. Smut had already seen something of the world; had mixed with people of a different type and a different outlook; had read books that expressed the wisdom of the greatest minds; had felt the movement of the new order of things.

Taffy would have kept Smut talking till midnight every night if he would have stayed. But Smut was not enthusiastic. He took his good fortune as a matter of course. He believed that he had a rich father, and that he need not worry himself very much over anything. Hence he was inclined to take matters easily, and now and then to put on airs.

Taffy sometimes wondered what it would feel like to have a rich father; to have no worry about ways and means, to listen to no grumblings about the future, to mix with people of culture and refinement, to wear his Sunday clothes every day of the week.

He begrudged Smut nothing of all the good things he enjoyed, but there was no denying he would have liked an equal opportunity. The grinding life of a farm labourer was not an ideal existence. He had his compensations, of course. He loved the open country, the wide, wind-swept moors, the fresh, sweet air, the music and laughter of the streams. It was no hardship to get up with the lark, and swing himself out across the dewy fields to look after the cattle and sheep. He loved nature passionately—animate and inanimate—loved to listen to the twitter of the skylark, and to the round, rich notes of the blackbird and thristle; loved the bleating of kine

and the bark of the distant sheep-dog; loved to eat his midday meal out of doors, and listen to the hum of invisible insects and smell the pungent odour of mugwort and wild thyme and betony.

Nevertheless, the sight of Smut in his fine clothes always stirred in his heart a longing for something unrealised, for a glimpse of the great world that lay beyond the quiet fields of Crowdale.

He did not want to be a replica of his foster brother. He could never be that. He had a feeling frequently that Smut was not making the most of his opportunity. He lacked the spur to effort and enterprise, lacked the incentive to study. He was content to "scrape through." He had got the idea into his head that he would never need to exert himself—that his father was rich enough to see him through to the end.

Crowdale saw less and less of Smut as the years went by. He spent most of his vacations with friends; sometimes in travelling abroad. Crowdale was too completely out of the world to suit his taste. Its simple ways and homely fare jarred him; he had become accustomed to French cookery and to the refinements of well-ordered households.

Peter Longton and his wife both felt the irony of the situation, but the time was over and past for much speaking. They saw their son grow up "a gentleman," as they phrased it; but he was almost as dead to them as though he slept in the churchyard. His fine manners and fine ways and fine clothes gave them no pleasure. He was still kind to them in many little ways. He remembered gratefully all they had done for him, but he could not make Crowdale his home, and they were painfully

conscious of the fact that they seemed common in his eyes.

It was to the son of Henry Discombe that they turned for counsel and for comfort—to the lad they had robbed of his birthright. How much it hurt them no one knew. It was a subject that could not be discussed even in their most private moments.

If Ruth Longton could have forgotten, she would have been a happy woman. The farm had prospered almost beyond their hopes. No judgment of God had come in the shape of blighted crops or smitten cattle; there had been neither floods nor drought to do any harm. When the rent had been paid, there was always a little over to add to the gradually accumulating store. The rainy day was being provided for. They were independent of Henry Discombe now.

Sometimes for days on the stretch she never thought of the past. Taffy was almost as dear to her as her own child. He had called her mother so long that she half persuaded herself at times that she was his mother; and, Smut being out of the way, she grew reconciled to his absence and did not miss him.

But dark days always followed the bright ones. The sluices of memory would be thrown open—often without warning. The years would roll up like a scroll, and she would shrink back with fright at the deed which seemed so venial then but which looked so shameful now.

Peter suffered much less, for he was much less imaginative. Moreover, he almost persuaded himself that everything had turned out for the best, as far as the lads were concerned. Taffy, he was quite

sure, was in his right place on a farm. He was strong, broad shouldered, and tough as a thong; while Smut was pale and narrow chested, and utterly unsuited to an outdoor life. As to the mere sentiment attaching to name and parentage, he was not greatly concerned. Birth and condition, he assured himself, were always matters of accident. Besides, Nature often managed the thing so badly that anybody might be excused for trying to rearrange matters now and then. He honestly believed that he was as fond of Taffy as he was of his own son, and in this he was not far wrong.

He knew when "the fit was on Ruth," as he termed it, and he never made any attempt to comfort her. As far as possible, he kept out of her way. "She'll be all right again to-morrow," he would say to himself. "It's no use vexing her by talking about the past. I wish she could forget it."

Smut had barely turned his twenty-first year when news came of Henry Discombe's death. He was at Oxford at the time, and had just scraped through "Mods." The news startled him very considerably, for he did not know how his future would be affected. For several years past he had received, in quarterly instalments, a very handsome allowance. Suppose that should cease? Suppose the widow should claim all the property? What if he had to go out into the world and earn his own living?

For more than a week he could neither eat nor sleep. He did not grieve for his supposed father—that was hardly to be expected. He had never seen him, and there was no tie of nature that had been wrenched. But the thought of giving up the free and easy life he had led, of facing the world alone,

and relying on his own brain and hand, filled him with dismay.

He had been having a good time, and he knew it. So good a time that he sometimes wished Taffy could come up to Oxford and see the life he led. He would have invited him during "Eights" week, and paid all expenses, could he have been quite sure of his foster brother; but he feared Taffy would feel out of place and look out of place among all the gay and fashionable people who thronged the barges and lined the river's bank. Taffy was a handsome fellow, no doubt, with a well-informed mind and an engaging manner, but he was country born and bred, a fact which home-made clothes did nothing to hide.

Smut was really grateful for his privileges; grateful to the fellows who invited him to spend his "vac." with them, when they knew he could not return their hospitality; grateful to the good English mothers who gave him welcome, and even a double welcome, because he was motherless and his father was beyond the seas; grateful to the sisters of the fellows, bright, wholesome girls, who treated him as though he had been brother to them.

Yes, there was no doubt he was having a good time. He did no work to speak of—why should he? He did not play with any great enthusiasm. He might have rowed in his college boat in torpids, but it was too great an effort; too great an effort, also, to take part in the Union debates.

He had no vices to speak of. He kept outside the fast set, and, more important still, he kept out of debt; but there was nothing to distinguish him from a crowd of others who had far less ability than he.

What filled him with terror was the fear lest this easy and happy life should come suddenly to an end.

After nine days of anxiety came complete and joyous relief. Henry Discombe had left all his money to his son, without reserve. His wife, being rich in her own right, did not need consideration.

Smut gave a luncheon that day to as many fellows as his rooms would hold, and modestly let out that he was in possession of three thousand a year.

For a moment there was silence. Then the fellows began to congratulate him. All except Jim Bates, who said, after a pause :

"I'm sorry for you, Discombe."

"Sorry?" Smut questioned in surprise.

"If you were poor, you might do something—you have it in you; but, with all that tin, I fear you're lost."

"Lost be hanged. I shall find out now what life means."

"And you'll give up the law?"

Smut was silent for a moment. "No," he said slowly; "it was the pater's wish. I'll scrape through somehow."

Six months later Smut visited his old home again. He came to attend his father's funeral. Peter Longton caught a chill one drenching wet day, which developed into double pneumonia, and in three days he was dead.

He had no thought that his end was so near. Before he realised how ill he was, he passed into unconsciousness, and so breathed his last. Ruth welcomed her son with a sorely troubled heart, and felt that the burden of her secret was now doubly

hard to bear, since Peter was no longer alive to share it with her.

Smut was touched in a way he did not quite understand. The call of Nature puzzled him because he did not know. There was a look in Ruth Longton's eyes that brought unbidden tears to his own. For a few moments he was a boy again, and when he tried to speak a lump in his throat choked him, and he turned away and walked to the window and looked out into the driving rain.

He and Taffy sat up till long after midnight talking, and during that talk they came nearer to each other than they had done for many years.

CHAPTER III

LIFE'S LITTLE DAY

RUTH had retired to her room, accompanied by her only sister, who had come a dozen miles to keep her company.

Smut and Taffy drew their chairs nearer the fire, the one lighting a brier pipe, the other an expensive cigar. For a while neither of them spoke. Their thoughts were back again in that rapidly receding past, when they were children together. Outside the wind *soughed* in the trees and drove the rain in splashes against the window; now and then it rumbled in the chimney and complained through the chinks of the door.

In the room above, the dead man slept his last sleep, unheeding the wind and the rain. Nothing mattered to him now. Life's little day was done; its struggles and disappointments for ever past.

Smut thought of him pityingly—from his point of view, such a life did not seem worth the living. He had known nothing of pleasure, nothing of luxury. The joy of books, the delights of art, the thrill of music, of beauty, of passion even, in its widest sense, had never touched him. He had vegetated in the fields and on the moors from youth to manhood, and from manhood to life's decline—toiling, fighting, economising; and now he lay asleep, the day done, the curtain of night drawn round him for ever.

Smut looked across at Taffy quietly smoking his brier pipe and gazing steadily into the crackling fire, and a similar feeling touched him as he experienced for the dead man lying in the room above.*

Taffy also would vegetate in the wilderness, would toil and struggle and chafe. Perhaps he would marry some country girl, and have children; then he would grow old, and die. But life—as Smut thought of it and dreamt of it—would never come nigh him. Romance and beauty, art and culture, the pleasures of the table, the delights of travel, the rush and movement of city life.

“Ah, well,” he reflected, “what the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t feel. What he has never known he can never miss; and if he is content I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

Then he took his cigar from between his lips and a smile stole over his pale face. Thanks to an able and enterprising father he could soar above the humdrum and commonplace in life. No mean economies for him, no grinding toil, no worry and struggle, no hardship; but just a delightful round of pleasure and self-indulgence. Toil was for those who were compelled to toil, but for those who had plenty, ease and idleness. He would have to scrape through his law examinations and get called to the Bar—that was due to the memory of his father; but beyond lay the land of the lotus eaters. Why should he work and fill the place of somebody who had to work to live?

He broke the silence at length. “This is rough luck on your mother, Taffy.”

“Yes; she feels it very much.”

“You will keep on the farm, I suppose?”

"I suppose so. I don't know yet. Father was rather reticent about his affairs."

"If I can help you in any way——"

"Thank you, Smut. I hope we shall be able to rub along without borrowing."

"Oh, I don't mean that exactly. They were kind to me, you know, in the old days——"

"Mother was very fond of you—and is still. I have sometimes thought she cared more for you than for me."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"You were the delicate one, and that always appeals to a woman."

"I quickly grew out of it. I'm as strong as a horse now."

Taffy smiled but did not reply.

"Of course I am not such a giant as you," Smut went on. "You are one in a hundred. But taking the average fellow, I can hold my own."

"And you enjoy your life at Oxford?"

"Enjoy! I tell you it is just great."

"You have to work pretty hard, I suppose?"

"Some fellows grind terribly. But then they have to. For myself"—and he laughed uneasily—"I'm no 'swot,' and I never intend to be."

"But you'll try to distinguish yourself?"

"Why should I? And besides, what's the good of it? I believe in giving the poor devils who have no money a chance."

"I thought you were ambitious, Smut."

"So I am in a way, but I don't believe in taking the bread out of other people's mouths. Do you, now?"

"I believe in every man making the best of his

opportunity. What is the use of your going to Oxford if nothing comes of it?"

"Oh, but a lot will come of it. It gives a man tone, if you understand. The social gain is immense. A man who has been to the 'Varsity' is hall-marked—do you follow? I'm already a member of one of the best clubs in London."

"Is that all, Smut?"

"All, man? Why, you don't seem to appreciate!"

"Perhaps I don't," Taffy answered thoughtfully; "but you seem to me to have such a great opportunity——"

"I have, and I'm making the most of it. Don't you make any mistake about that. Unless the world comes to an end I'm going to have as good a time as any man ever had; and what is more, Taffy, when you come to see me I'll give you the time of your life."

"Thank you, Smut!"

"I mean it, Taffy. I'm not one to forget old days and old friends. You are like a brother to me, and always will be."

"It's kind of you to say so, Smut. But, from the force of circumstances, our paths must be wide apart."

"That's true in a sense, of course. But we shall remain friends all the same. I'm bound to say it's rough on you to have to slave on a farm."

"Oh, I don't know. Hard work hurts nobody; and then, you know, I love the country and an outdoor life."

"And you don't pine for something different?"

"I don't say that, Smut. Things are a bit slow

sometimes, and we all have dreams, I suppose, now and then," and he twisted his silver watch chain round his finger and looked dreamily into the fire.

Smut watched him for some moments in silence, then remarked suddenly: "Is that a lucky sixpence you have on your chain?"

Taffy coloured slightly and withdrew his eyes from the fire.

"It's a gift," he said slowly with a wistful smile.

"A gift, eh? Did you bore the hole through it?"

"Yes."

"You must value it greatly."

"I do."

Smut felt interested. Taffy did not usually answer in monosyllables, neither was he in the habit of blushing. Had some breath of romance already swept across his life? He spoke a few minutes ago of having dreams. Had he already——

"There isn't sixpennyworth of silver in it, is there?" Taffy said with an uneasy laugh. "It was just a fancy of mine to stick it on my chain."

"It's worn rather thin," Smut remarked indifferently.

"It was thin when she gave it to me," Taffy answered suddenly, then blushed again.

"So it's the gift of a lady, eh?" Smut questioned, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, it's more than a year ago, now," Taffy said, putting a bold face on the matter and speaking in a tone of indifference. "She was riding to hounds with Sir John's daughter—visiting at the Hall, you know. I happened to be near the gate when they came up; so she called to me to open the gate for them——"

"Civilly, of course?"

"Oh, well, in the usual tone, you know."

"What words did she use?"

"'Young man, will you open the gate?' or 'Would you mind opening the gate for us?' She was quite nice about it."

"And you said, 'With pleasure,' of course?"

"Something to that effect. She was an awfully pretty girl—not more than eighteen or nineteen at the outside."

"And what did Sir John's daughter say?"

"Nothing at all. I don't think she even looked at me."

"And you didn't look at her, I expect."

"I don't think I did. You see, as I held the gate open I noticed that Miss Leyland's saddle-girth had come loose."

"So you knew her name?"

"Not at the time; I found that out later. But she would have been off her horse at the next fence. So I just told her, and she pulled up and waited while I tightened the strap for her. She was really quite nice, and when I had finished she gave me sixpence."

"And you took it?"

"Well, of course. What else could I do?"

"I should have flung it back into her face."

"Oh, no; she was quite pleasant about it."

"You might have been a tramp, or a farm labourer, at best."

"No doubt. I was in my shirt-sleeves, and we don't wear broadcloth and top hats on week days, as you know."

"Oh, but really, Taffy, you look a gentleman in any case, and speak like one——"

"Bless you, Smut, that's nothing to the point," Taffy interrupted with a laugh. "She meant it kindly, I am quite sure."

"And you've actually kept it ever since?"

"Yes; it's a whim of mine. I wouldn't lose it for anything."

Smut smiled superciliously and was silent for awhile. Taffy caressed the disc of silver between his finger and thumb and looked steadily into the fire.

"And how did you discover her name?" Smut questioned at length.

"Oh, it leaked out somehow. You see, she remained at the Hall for a long time. She was there again a few weeks ago. Her mother was sister to Sir John. Her father, I believe, is a retired Indian judge."

"I see. You'll have to be careful, Taffy," and Smut lighted a fresh cigar.

Taffy coloured slightly but did not reply. His thoughts rushed back suddenly to the dead man lying still and silent in the room above. He and Smut had talked, forgetful of Death's presence—forgetful of the stricken mother sobbing her heart out on her sister's breast.

The wind still rumbled in the chimney and wailed shrilly through the chinks of the door. In a far corner of the room a grandfather clock ticked loudly and monotonously; the fire fell slowly into dull, grey ashes. For a long time neither of them spoke.

Then Taffy rose slowly and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"I must be up early to-morrow morning," he said with a sigh. "There are a great many things to be attended to."

"I fear I can be of no service?" Smut questioned, throwing the stump of his cigar into the grate.

"I shall be able to manage, thank you. You sleep on till breakfast time."

On the following day Peter Longton was laid to rest with his fathers, and on the day following that Smut said good-bye to his mother and Taffy and returned to Oxford.

He was glad enough to get away. He disliked unpleasant things. The sight of his mother's tearful eyes irritated him, her obtrusive affection jarred upon his nerves; moreover, from his point of view, Crowdale in autumn was never a desirable place. There were no gas-lamps, no side-walks, no company. The nearest theatre was six miles away; the nearest railway station nearly two miles. Even his letters he had to fetch from the end of the lane.

Oh, no. Crowdale might suit Taffy, but it did not suit him. The simple life had no attractions for him, the country no charm.

Taffy drove him to the station, but very little was said on the way.

"You will not be sorry to get back to Oxford," Taffy said as they waited at the station for the train to arrive.

"Well, no," he answered slowly. "You see, Oxford is a frightfully cheerful place."

"And Crowdale is not cheerful just at present."

"Well, no; there's no denying, old fellow; it isn't cheerful. How you can stand it I don't know."

Taffy smiled a little wistfully, but did not answer for a moment. Then he said:

"Mother is very grateful to you for coming."

"She should not say that," he replied with feeling

"It was the very least I could do. I shall never forget how she mothered me for years and years."

"She is very fond of you."

"I believe she is, and I am fond of her; I am really."

"I wish it were possible for you to show it a little more—she is very sensitive."

"I'll send her a present at Christmas; but here comes the train. Good-bye, Taffy, and good luck to you."

"Good-bye, Smut."

So they parted, and Taffy drove slowly back to Crowdale to take up a burden that he had no right to bear.

Ruth never recovered from the shock of Peter's death. She lost interest in everything—even life seemed a cheat and a delusion. She wondered why she had been born. Looking back, the way was strewn from first to last with the wrecks of shattered hopes. She had loved her husband—not in any deep or passionate sense—she could have loved any other man she might have chanced to marry just as well. A girl had to marry somebody or be left on the stream to fight for herself; and Peter, as it turned out, had made a very good husband, and she had learned to lean upon him and to rely on his judgment, and as the years advanced her affection had grown.

But all the real wealth and passion of her love she had given to her children, and she had given it—so it seemed—in vain. Two of them had died in early childhood, and the third she had lost through her own wickedness and pride.

The bitterest part of her bereavement was that

she could not call Smut her own; that he was indifferent to her affection, and shrank from every expression of her love. It was little comfort to her that he was a gentleman, that he wore a diamond pin and dressed in the latest fashion. She wanted to take him to her heart and hug him. She wanted to rain kisses on his cheek and brow, and he would have none of it. She had become as a strange woman to him—she, his mother; and the thought tortured her through every fibre of her being.

She burst into a paroxysm of uncontrollable weeping when he drove away to the station with Taffy. She saw as with eyes of flame that he was impatient to go, that he had lost all interest in her and in the old home.

And now she was left to the care of one who was not her own—one whom she and her husband had wronged and robbed, and doomed to a life of toil and possibly poverty.

She would have loved Taffy more had she not wronged him so deeply. She almost resented his presence sometimes. His very kindness hurt her and made her angry. But for him she would have had an easy conscience, even though she had an empty stomach. It was the very irony of fate that now in her widowhood she should be left to the care and protection of this foster child whom she had cheated of his birthright.

When she saw him returning alone she could have shrieked, so great was her distress. The sound of his voice—tender, pitiful—was like salt on a raw wound.

“Go away and leave me for awhile, Taffy,” she said; “I can’t bear it.”

He turned away without a word and went away to a distant field to look after the ploughing. The lease of the farm had yet several years to run, and Taffy at once took the management into his own hands.

Ruth's hold upon life steadily relaxed. She did her best to keep up and go about her work as usual, but the effort became greater and more exhausting week by week.

At the end of six months she took to her bed, and a month later the doctor gave her to understand only too plainly that there was no hope. She might live a few weeks or even months, but she would never get up again.

For several days after that she scarcely spoke to anyone. Then she requested that a very urgent note be sent to Smut, asking him to come home, as she had something important to tell him before she died.

CHAPTER IV

INDECISION

SMUT was enjoying himself at the country house of Sir Jonathan Cuff. It was the long vacation, and though he was supposed to do a good deal of reading out of term, he had not opened a book yet, and he had been down a month. It was his second visit to the palatial home of Sir Jonathan, and he was in no hurry to leave it.

Sir Jonathan was a City knight, a company promoter, and a director of a number of large drapery and provision establishments in the City and in the West End. He was a self-made man and by no means slow in giving praise to his maker. In manner he was hearty, in temper cheerful, in speech loquacious, in politics a Liberal-Conservative or a Conservative-Liberal—he did not know which—in religion a Nonconformist-Episcopalian.

Sir Jonathan had two children, Cyril and Enid. Cyril was Smut's great chum at Oxford, hence his invitation to Ravenscourt. Enid was two years younger than her brother, but several years his senior in the matter of worldly wisdom. She was rather a good-looking girl, with a fresh complexion, blue eyes and a mass of light brown hair. Smut had been greatly smitten with her on the occasion of his first visit. His present visit had tremendously deepened the impression. In fact, he had come to the conclusion that he had met his fate, and that if he

were to search the world over he would never find another girl who was so much to his taste. Not only was she good-looking, but she was intelligent, practical and energetic. Languid, soulful girls might be all right to flirt with for an hour, but in a wife a man wanted a smart, energetic woman. Moreover, Enid Cuff would share with her brother Cyril their father's huge fortune, and there was nothing like money for making things go smoothly. Also he was convinced that Enid was not altogether indifferent to his attentions. Indeed, she had shown him marked favour, had several times left other men that she might talk to him, and when he had pressed her hand on several occasions she had not resented it in any way.

Of course Smut was not insensible to his own importance. A young man of three-and-twenty with three thousand a year in his own right was not to be met with every day, and yet in comparison with Sir Jonathan's enormous wealth his income seemed trifling indeed.

Enid, however, did not appear to be greatly impressed by mere money; perhaps familiarity had bred contempt. She had grown up to think in thousands and to associate wealth with trade.

She hated trade, she told Smut, and never by any chance did she allude to her father's association with it.

"She adored the professions, especially the law; it was such an ennobling calling, and so refined."

Smut felt his chest expand as these sentiments dropped from her lips. He did not quite see where the ennobling part of it came in, but that did not matter. If she thought it was ennobling he had no

doubt it was so. Women as a rule were much keener of perception than men.

"You must be proud to think that you are joining the ranks of the great legal luminaries," she said to him one day as they walked on the edge of the lawn in the shade of the elms.

·Smut blushed and said he was.

"It must be just lovely," she said with an exalted look in her eyes. "Think of the refined and classic precincts of the Temple compared with the vulgar and sordid swelter of the City."

"I don't know anything about the City," he answered.

"Of course you don't. Yours are the Temple dinners and not the Mansion House lunches——"

"And rotten dinners they are," he interrupted; "and the wine is execrable."

"That is a mere detail, surely," she answered with an expressive glance. "It is not food that makes a dinner, but the company, the associations, the——"

"The company is jolly bad, too, at times," he remarked.

"Of course, inferior people do enter the professions now and then, I have no doubt; but surely the smallness of the man is lost sight of in the greatness of the order, just as a lord is a lord whatever may be his moral or intellectual shortcomings."

"Do you know, I have thought of that myself," he said evasively; "but I never heard anyone else put it so plainly as you have done."

"The trouble is so many women don't think," she said impressively.

"Is that so?" he questioned.

"Do you mean to say you have not noticed that,

Mr. Discombe?" she questioned in a tone of surprise.

"To tell you the truth," he answered lamely, "I have not talked with many women—I mean seriously."

"But you must have known crowds of girls?"

"Slightly only," he protested. "You see, at the 'Varsity we rarely see a girl except during Eights week."

"But you are only up about six months in the year."

"That is true; but a fellow like me, without brothers or sisters, has very little chance of knowing girls. Besides—I have never been greatly drawn to anyone till—till now——"

"Oh, Mr. Discombe!"

"I wish you would call me Ralph, as the others do," and he blushed violently.

"May I?" and she glanced at him coyly.

"Will you really?" he said, seizing one of her hands and pressing it.

"If you wish it very much," and she glanced shyly up into his face and smiled.

"Wish it very much! Oh, Enid——"

Then Cyril suddenly appeared round a corner, and the conversation came to an abrupt end. Smut turned away his head to hide his confusion, but Enid was as calm and self-possessed as though they had been discussing the weather or a church bazaar.

An hour later came the urgent message from his mother. It had been sent on by his scout from Oxford, hence it was already a day late. Smut read it with an unpleasant frown upon his face. It was

so inconsiderate of his foster-mother to choose such a time for her exit, and more inconsiderate still to request his presence. He hated scenes, as she knew. Hated everything unpleasant. Why, if she must die, could she not slip out of life quietly and without fuss? That she had anything of importance to communicate he did not believe. It was only an excuse for getting him there.

His first impulse was to send a wire that he could not come, and to follow it up with a letter saying how grieved he was and expressing unabated love and sympathy.

He could easily furnish excuses for this course of action. To begin with, he was enjoying himself. Life at Ravenscourt during the summer weather was just a dream. Everyone did exactly what he or she liked. He came down to breakfast when it suited him, and there was always variety enough to tempt the most fastidious appetite. If he felt lazy he could lie in a hammock or bury himself in an easy chair with a book. If he felt energetic he could play tennis or golf. If he felt sentimental he could sit and look at Enid, or, better still, talk to her. If he wanted to see the country there was his motor car always at hand, and if he wanted to mix with the crowd London was only sixty minutes away.

It seemed ridiculous that he should be expected to leave all these good things and take a long journey into Devonshire just to see a woman who was ill and imagined she was going to die.

But, worse than all, if he went away now he might miss his chance with Enid. That she was in the humour to receive his attentions there was no denying. If that stupid brother of hers had not

blundered on to the scene he would very likely have known his fate by this.

His heart was hammering at his side even now. He never felt so strangely excited before, never felt so keen a desire for possession. And believing, as he did, in the old adage that it was wise to strike when the iron was hot, it seemed madness to rush away just when he was on the point of getting what he wanted.

There was yet another consideration. Two more of Cyril's college chums were arriving on the following day. Smut could not forget the fact that Jim Bates was not only one of the cleverest fellows of his year, but one of the handsomest and most popular; and if by any chance he should be smitten by Enid—and it was more than likely he would be, for she was the kind of girl to fascinate any man of sense and understanding—then his (Smut's) chance would drop down to zero.

Smut took the letter to his own room to read it again. He would not decide hastily. He would give himself an hour to think over the matter, in any case.

After the second perusal he began to feel worried. Had she some secret to communicate—some mystery to unfold? Clearly she had something to say that was for his ears alone, and something she had locked up in her heart till now. What could it be? Would it be something to his advantage, or would it be something he would always regret having heard?

The more he considered these questions the more worried he grew. There was no escape for him. He would have to face the situation and make the best of it.

Ruth Longton lay watching the hands travel slowly round the dial of the clock and listening intently at the same time for the sound of wheels on the rutty road. She felt sure that Smut would come; but whether even now she would tell him all the truth she was not sure. When she dictated the letter urging him to come at once she felt as though she could not possibly face death with this secret weighing upon her soul; but since then she had thought more of Smut than of herself. Why should she try to shift this cruel burden on to him? He had done no wrong. If he was living in a false position and under a false name that was no fault of his. Moreover, it would be a cruel thing to tell him now. She and her husband had committed the sin. Let them face the Judge of all the earth in penitence and humility and accept the punishment due to their wrongdoing.

She argued to herself—as she had often done before—that nothing could be altered now; it was too late in the day. Smut had received his education, Taffy had been neglected. Smut was a gentleman with a gentleman's tastes and habits, Taffy was a plain farmer content to live a simpler life. Smut mixed with gentlefolk and would be unhappy anywhere else. Taffy would possibly be very miserable if he were suddenly thrust into the company of the rich.

What good, therefore, would come to Smut or to anyone else by telling him all the truth? She tried to picture to herself what would happen if she made a full confession. Would Smut have more moral courage, more strength of character, than she and her husband possessed? Would he make amends—

restore to Taffy as far as it was possible to restore all that had been taken from him? Or would he lock the secret in his own heart and go on as he had been going to the end of the chapter? In either case it would mean the spoiling of his life.

After awhile, however, her thoughts took a different turn. She was not sure that Taffy was not a happier man, and she was convinced that he was a better man than Smut. Smut had all the privileges and advantages, and during the last year or two he had, what seemed to her, unbounded wealth; but was he the better man in consequence? She was certain that the opposite was the truth. He had become idle, wasteful, extravagant. His moral nature had become enervated by self-indulgence, and there was no one near him to keep him up to the mark. He might have no glaring vices, but it seemed clear even to her dull eyes that the best that was in him had been left undeveloped. There had been no spur to enterprise. He had more outside polish than Taffy, spoke with a somewhat different accent; but it was doubtful if he knew so much or had read so widely.

And what was the future to be for him? Was it not more than likely that all this money would be his curse? Of late years he had cherished no ambition except to have what he called "a good time." He had disappointed Taffy horribly by his utter indifference to those great and lofty ideals which usually inspire the thoughtful man. He was content to eat and drink and be merry.

It might be the making of Smut to renounce the name and position that were not his and start afresh to carve out for himself a career. The noblest charac-

ters, she had heard somewhere, were forged in stress and storm. It might be the salvation of her boy to have to work for his own living.

So she swung like a pendulum from point to point, now resolving to tell all the truth and now shrinking back with alarm at the thought.

The afternoon wore slowly away, but no sound of wheels fell upon her ear. The window of her room was wide open, for the weather was hot and sultry. Very few sounds broke the stillness. It was the period between the two harvests, when the click of the reaping machine was still. The hay had been safely stacked. The corn was only just beginning to show patches of yellow here and there. The farm hands were out among the turnips and mangolds. Taffy had ridden to town for medicine. Her sister, who still kept her company, dozed in a chair. In the kitchen the maid-of-all-work was deep in the mysteries of a penny novel. Ruth lay quite still, with wide open eyes—listening. She was in no pain, but she was conscious that her strength was ebbing slowly away. She wished sometimes that she could sleep and forget. But she slept very little; her brain seemed to grow more and more active with every passing hour, and with the wasting of the flesh came a quickening of the moral sense.

The long summer day wore slowly to its close. The twilight faded silently over the hills. The stars came out one by one. The birds ceased to twitter in the trees, but there was no word from Smut—no intimation that he had received her message.

Taffy came and sat with her an hour after supper, but she was in no humour for conversation. She lay listening still, with eyes closed and every sense alert.

She could not tell anyone—not even her sister—how much she longed for the presence of Smut. He was her son, after all, the only one of three that had been born to her, and the mother-heart within her cried out for a sight of his face. The presence of Taffy was no comfort to her now. His patience and tenderness hurt her at times. She was thankful when at length he rose and left the room.

“Oh, Robin—my own Robin,” she cried softly to herself when all the others slept and the house was wrapped in darkness and silence. “Why did I ever give you up and sin for you? Now you are lost to me, and you do not care for your own mother.”

Towards morning she fell into a troubled sleep, and when she opened her eyes again a new day had dawned.

“He will surely come to-day,” was her first thought. “Surely I shall look upon his face to-day!”

She lay intently listening with her face toward the open window. The scent of clover was wafted into the room from the neighbouring fields, the twitter of birds in the apple trees at the end of the garden fell distinctly on her ears. Now and then the sudden quack-quack of a duck down in the moor cut across the silence like a knife, but as it grew towards noon the stillness became complete.

She heard at length the sound of unfamiliar footsteps and raised herself with a start, when there came a sharp rat-tat-tat on the front door. A moment or two later her sister rushed into the room with a telegram.

It was from Smut, announcing that he would

come down by the last train. That was all. Not a word of sympathy, not a hint of affection.

Ruth closed her eyes, and the tears stole from underneath the lashes, and rolled silently down her cheeks. The long tension was at an end. Her boy was coming home. In a few hours now she would look upon his face again, hear his voice, feel her hand clasped in his. Perhaps—perhaps she would have courage to tell him all and claim his love. She was not sure even yet what she would do or say. She would wait till he came.

It was quite dark when he arrived. She heard the sound of wheels long before he reached the house. She heard his voice at length, speaking to Taffy, who met him at the garden gate. The same voice. It had altered scarcely at all since he was a lad—how well she remembered it! How often it spoke to her in her dreams!

She listened for some tone of sympathy in it, but it was hard and formal.

"How is your mother?" she heard him say to Taffy. "*Your* mother"—what a bitter mockery it was! She wanted to shriek out the truth then and there. The burden of her secret was becoming too great to be borne.

Smut manifested no impatience to reach her bedside. He was tired and hungry, and not in a very good temper. He could not help contrasting the poor and mean appointments of the house with those he had left. There was no servant to help off his dust-coat, no sideboard laid out with appetising food, no obsequious butler to bring him a glass of wine to cheer him after his journey, no welcome from handsomely dressed ladies in a richly appointed room.

He shrugged his shoulders and curled his lip unconsciously. It was an intolerable nuisance to be dragged to this out-of-the-way place just because a woman who had mothered him, and had been handsomely paid for doing it, had become obsessed by a desire to see him.

"We have supper almost ready for you in the kitchen," Taffy said; "but you will see mother first?"

"Thanks, but if you don't mind I'll have something to eat now," he answered lightly. "The truth is, I am almost famished."

"She has been expecting you since yesterday noon, and now that you have come——"

"Oh, well, a few minutes longer will not make any difference, surely. Tell her I won't be long."

"As you will. But I am glad you have come; you will see a great change in her."

"I don't like seeing people who are ill, but it can't be helped, I suppose. Now for the supper."

Taffy led the way into the kitchen or living room, then turned and went upstairs to explain Smut's delay.

"Why could he not have come at once?" Ruth asked querulously. "Think of all the hours I have waited!"

"Yes, mother; but Smut does not understand," he said quietly.

"No, he does not understand," she repeated feebly. "But—but——"

"Yes, mother?"

"I must talk to him alone."

"I will see that he comes to you directly he has finished his supper."

Smut, however, was in no hurry to finish. The

chicken was excellent, and the home-cured ham was delicious. In spite of the rich food to which he had become accustomed, he was bound to admit that the homely cookery of the farm was not at all bad.

He followed Taffy slowly and reluctantly up the stairs at length, and into the sick room. Taffy did not wait to see their greeting. He turned suddenly and closed the door behind him, leaving mother and son together.

It was after midnight when Smut came downstairs again.

CHAPTER V

CONFESSION

RUTH's yearning eyes grew dim with tears directly Smut came into the room, and for several moments she was unable to speak. She reached out her wasted hand, which he took with scarcely concealed reluctance—it was white and clammy, and he had grown very fastidious of late.

"I hope you are feeling better," he said with an unconscious drawl, and he dropped her hand suddenly. "I am sorry you are so bored."

"Bored?" she questioned with a little start.

"I mean, you know, it must be an awful bore to be bowled over this lovely weather, and all that," and he drew up a cane-bottomed chair and sat facing her.

He could not see her face very plainly. The curtains hung between her pillow and a small lamp which stood on a round table near the head of the bed.

She watched him for a moment or two in silence. The light from the lamp fell full on his face, revealing every line and every change of expression. He had grown strangely like his father, she thought. Of course, Peter's face was tanned and weather-beaten and deeply lined with care, but in his young days he was curiously like what Smut was now.

She gave an unconscious sigh. Then said, with an effort, "I wanted to see you so much——"

"Yes, so I understood," he interrupted. "It was awfully nice of you, and I feel flattered——"

"Oh, Smut!"—and the tears rushed into her eyes again—"if—if you only knew——"

"You are pretty bad, I suppose," he said awkwardly, "but you'll be soon all right again."

"No," she said slowly and with a far-away look in her eyes; "I shall never get better, and I don't know that I want to get better. I'm very tired, and shall be glad to rest—if—if—the dead do rest." And she sighed again.

He shifted uneasily in his chair, and wished the interview was at an end. Death and the dead were not pleasant subjects to discuss. He would like to change the subject if he could. He was glad he hadn't chosen the Church as a profession. Fancy being a curate and having to visit all sorts of sick people. It was lucky for him that he was independent of every and any profession. He could steer his own course across the smooth sea of life, and give a wide berth to all unpleasant things.

"Oh, look here," he said at length, "you should not be downhearted. You've done the square thing, you know, all the way along, and you've nothing to worry about."

She moved her head slowly from side to side and closed her eyes. "It's just that that is troubling me," she answered in a choking voice. "I haven't always done the square thing. I've—I've been very wicked."

He stared at her for a moment or two in dumb surprise. Surely she was a little off her head, or was it a way people had when they thought they were going to die?

She opened her eyes and looked at him narrowly.



"She turned as the gate swung back . . . and smiled" (see page 77)

Having said so much, should she tell him all? It might be her only opportunity, and she was longing with an unutterable desire for peace and rest. The burden of her secret was becoming more and more grievous and intolerable day by day—almost hour by hour. If she did not tell Smut she felt she would have to tell somebody, and it would be better to tell him than tell a stranger. If she had confided her secret to the vicar of the parish, as once or twice she thought of doing, would he have known what to do with it? Surely Smut was the one to know if anybody was to be told. And—and—oh, it was impossible to go into eternity with this secret upon her soul.

For more than twenty years she had been fighting and resisting, and now she was worn out. She had no strength to battle any longer.

Smut rose suddenly to his feet as if to leave the room. He had no more to say just now, and the silence was becoming strained and painful. When his foster-mother took to accusing herself of wickedness it was proof that she was hysterical. What she wanted, evidently, was rest and sleep.

Ruth half rose in bed and looked at him with sudden resolution.

"No, no; you must not go!" she gasped. "Sit down again. I've something to tell you. I *must* tell you. I sent for you that I might unburden my soul. What I have suffered God only knows, but I cannot bear it any longer——"

The words came rapidly, with sharp gasps between each sentence. Her eyes became dilated, her cheeks flamed with a deep red.

"Wait until to-morrow," he interjected as soon

as he could get in a word. "You are a little excited now. You will feel better after a night's sleep."

"No, no; I must tell you now," she said, with the same rapid utterance. "Sit down again. You must sit down. I cannot face another night with this burden on my conscience."

"Oh, very good," he said impatiently. "Out with it, if you must," and he sat down again, carefully and deliberately. Then added, "For the life of me I don't know why you want to bother me with your secrets."

"Because it concerns you," she said almost in a whisper.

"It seems to me your own son would be the proper party to talk to," he answered in a tone of irritation.

"You are my own son," she said with slow emphasis. "Oh, my boy——"

"What!" he exclaimed, springing suddenly to his feet. "Are you mad?"

"I think I was mad when Peter and I committed the sin," she answered slowly, "but I'm sane enough now."

He sat down again with a jerk, and stared at her speechless.

She was the calmer of the two now. "We were sorely tempted," she went on quietly. "Taffy got lost, and we thought he was dead. . . . That meant a hundred a year to us, and we were very hard up then. . . . It meant blame also for not looking after Henry Discombe's child.

"So we gave it out that it was our boy who was missing, and that you were Henry Discombe's child. Peter told the new servant who arrived that very evening, and the next day people came from far and

near and took stock of you, and pitied me because my child was missing.

"And all the time I thought of you, how, with Discombe's money, you could go to college and be a gentleman, and never know hardship and struggle as your father and I had done. Oh, my boy, my boy, it was for you I sinned, and have suffered ever since——"

"Go on with your story," he said shortly.

She sighed wearily, and then continued in the same low, even voice. "You've heard how Taffy was found three days later, and people came in dozens to see the child and to congratulate me on having found my own lad. What could I do? I couldn't tell them that for three days your father and I had been telling lies—that we had conspired together to palm off our own child on Henry Discombe. We had taken the step, and it was too late to go back. We hadn't the courage to confess ourselves liars and cheats, and, besides, we wanted you to be a gentleman, and so we let the matter stand. For my own sake and for Peter's sake I regretted it from the first. Lately I have regretted it for your sake. I knew I would have to tell you some day—the burden of it had become greater than I could bear——"

"Go on," he said after a long pause.

"It has been terribly hard," she sighed, "to see my own child drift away from me—to be treated by him as a stranger—to know that he did not care for me—that has been the bitterest drop in the bitter cup," and she looked at him longingly and pleadingly.

"I have prayed to God," she went on, "oh, so earnestly, but somehow I felt there was no forgiveness

for me until I confessed. Now I think He will forgive me, and that I shall die in peace." Then, after a sigh, she added, "If I could be sure of your forgiveness also."

He did not reply. He had not found his bearings yet. He felt as though he were at sea on a raft without rudder or compass, without a star to guide him, without hope of ever reaching shore again.

Everything he had ever dreamed or hoped for had suddenly collapsed. An earthquake had laid all his fair castles in ruins, and he was adrift in the night and in the storm. "Why don't you speak to me?" she said at length. "Have you no sympathy?"

"None," he answered bluntly. "Having kept me in ignorance all these years, why need you have blurred it out now?"

"I could not help it," she cried. "I could not bear it any longer. Oh, my boy! my boy!"

"And yet you profess to love me."

"Profess? Oh, Robin, my boy, have I not stained my soul for you?"

"Doubtless."

"And now you despise me," she cried, reaching out both hands toward him.

"There's certainly nothing in the event of twenty odd years ago to be proud of," he answered with a curl of the lip.

"I know, I know," she wailed. "Do you wonder I had not the courage to tell?"

"And now you wish me to publish your shame?" he asked scornfully.

"Not until I am dead, Smut. Oh, no. Let me be buried out of sight first. In the grave I shall not hear."

His brain cleared at once. He did not speak, however, for several moments. Then he said, with a slight curl of the lip, "You lay a heavy burden upon me."

"I know I do, my boy, I know I do," she answered feebly. "But you will wait until I'm gone, won't you?"

"If it is your will."

"It is! it is! And, oh! please don't despise me any more than you can help! I am your mother, remember, and I did it for love of you."

"You meant well by me, no doubt," he said a little huskily, "and—I forgive you."

She smiled at him with brimming eyes, and, after a moment's silence: "I think I shall sleep better to-night."

"I hope so."

"And when you go down will you ask your Aunt Jane to come to me?"

He winced visibly, but did not reply. The idea of that untidy, commonplace woman he had caught a glimpse of being his aunt was too humiliating for words. Indeed, the entire revelation to which he had listened had filled him with loathing.

Aunt Jane was just outside the door as he came out. She seemed a little startled at his sudden appearance, but he was too preoccupied to notice it.

"Mrs. Longton wants to see you," he said shortly.

"Yes, sir. I was just on the point of knocking; it is past the time for her medicine."

"Oh, is it?" And he passed on down the stairs.

Taffy was sitting, with his feet on the fender, pulling at his brier. He looked singularly handsome

in the dim light of a small lamp. Smut paused for a moment, with his hand on the door-knob. He had been struck before by the unlikeness of Taffy to his own people. He understood the secret of it now, and a pang shot through him like the stab of a knife. He needed no further confirmation of the truth of his mother's story. Taffy was Ralph Discombe. He was Robin Longton.

Taffy turned his head slowly and took the pipe out of his mouth.

"You have had a long talk with her?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"She has been very silent of late. Strange, isn't it, that she should have been so eager to see you?"

"I suppose it's quite true that sick people have curious fancies at times?"

"Yes."

"Well, you know," Smut answered deliberately, "she had a fancy that years and years ago she did me some trifling injustice, and she wanted to tell me so and ask my forgiveness. It was all nothing really; but there it is——"

"She has always been exceedingly conscientious," Taffy answered reflectively.

"But, really, trifles about children and between children——" Smut protested, with a fine air of magnanimity.

"Possibly trifles loom large in the light of Eternity," Taffy remarked.

"More likely when people are ill they lose their sense of proportion," and Smut took a cigar from a case and proceeded to cut the end off. "I suppose it is natural," Smut went on, as he drew up a chair

on the other side of the fireplace, "that as people get on in life they should live more and more in the past. She was full of reminiscences of bygone days. I never remember her talking so much."

"Curious," Taffy remarked.

"Why curious?"

"She is so reticent with me. I have sat with her for hours on the stretch and, generally, she has been quite silent. Have you been talking all the time?"

"Well, you see," and Smut shuffled uneasily in his chair, "when once the past was broached, there was so much to be said. Memories came crowding back, as it were, in troops. It is astonishing what a lot one recalls; and it has been quite interesting."

"She has seemed of late too weak to talk."

"It may have been the excitement of seeing me, of course. She was a bit exhausted when I left her, but she is a long way from the end yet."

"I hope so, indeed."

"You would find it very lonely here without her!"

"I don't know that I should remain. When she is gone, I shall be alone in the world, and there is very little to be made out of a farm like this. Besides, a stranger in the house might make ducks and drakes of things. Mother has been most careful——"

"But if you got married?"

"I have no thought of getting married, Smut."

"But there are plenty of eligible young women about—farmers' daughters—who would jump at you, and would make excellent wives into the bargain."

Taffy smiled, a curious contracted smile, but he did not reply. Involuntarily his fingers sought the

sixpence suspended on his watch-chain, and his eyes caught a distant look.

He had seen one face that had charmed him, heard one voice that was like music in his ears. During the last six months Sheila Leyland had crossed his path several times. Once he had walked with her half a mile to show her the way. Yet he had cherished no illusions respecting her. She was as much out of his reach as the moon—a being to be worshipped at a distance, to be loved in secret, to be idealised, revered, but not possessed.

When Smut was last at Crowdale he had told him the story of the lucky sixpence; had given him a description of Sheila Leyland. But he could not talk about her to-day. Hers was a name to be kept sacred, whispered only when there was no one to hear.

Smut would not understand. For, in spite of his book-learning and Oxford culture and rich acquaintances, he was without reverence and ideality. He saw everything through eyes of sense, measured everything by material standards, and had no vision of the spiritual and eternal.

Moreover, had Taffy been in the humour for speech, he had no words that would express what he felt. This strange emotion that touched him when first he looked upon Sheila Leyland's face had no name as far as he knew. Since then it had grown and grown, dominating his life and changing its entire complexion. He did not speak of it to himself as love. He did not know what it was.

He never thought of possession any more than he thought of possessing a star, and yet she completely banished the idea of his ever possessing any

other woman. There were, as Smut had suggested, young women in plenty, many of them pretty and well educated and thoroughly domesticated, but the idea of marrying any one of them was repugnant to every instinct of his nature.

Ruth Longton had suggested the matter to him more than once, but he had never taken the trouble to reply to her, just as to-night he had let the matter drop.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe at length, and rose to his feet.

"Don't be in a hurry, Smut, to get up in the morning," he said. "You will be tired after your journey."

"I am tired," Smut replied, throwing half of his cigar into the grate. "The worst is, I don't feel a bit sleepy."

"Oh, sleep will come," Taffy answered, with a smile, and he picked up the lamp and led the way upstairs.

CHAPTER VI

AUNT JANE

RUTH slept more soundly that night than she had done for weeks past. Now that she had unburdened herself of her long-kept secret, she felt that there was nothing left to worry about. She had done all that she could be expected to do. The long tension had been relieved. To her racked and tortured brain there came a sudden sense of peace and rest—the long agony of indecision was over. The fateful word had been spoken. Now she could close her eyes and sleep.

Curiously enough, she did not trouble herself about Smut. What the consequences might be to him scarcely occurred to her. She supposed—in a vague and unreasoning way—that he and Taffy would straighten things out between them. They were both young, and Smut, with his education, would be independent of Henry Discombe's fortune. So she closed her eyes wearily—like a child exhausted with its play—and fell into a profound and dreamless sleep.

Her sister Jane got up several times to look at her. Jane was wakeful and restless and not a little perplexed. She was not a clever woman, and what little native wit she possessed had been dulled by long years of hardship and care. But, like all her sex, she was inquisitive, and when her sister manifested such an eager desire to see Smut, and inti-

mated that she had something to say to him which was for his ears alone, she resolved, by hook or by crook, to find out what it was.

As it happened, this proved much easier than she had anticipated. Directly Taffy had retired, leaving Smut alone with his mother, she stole noiselessly along the passage and seated herself on the door-mat, with her ear to the keyhole. That this was a mean and dishonourable thing to do did not occur to her. As a matter of fact, her notions of honour were of the very crudest. To her commonplace intelligence, she was not doing anything wrong. She was not cheating, or stealing, or bearing false witness, or even coveting anyone's property. She was only sitting on the door-mat, listening, and she believed she had a perfect right to listen. If anyone was to blame, it was Ruth. Ruth had no right to try to keep secrets from her.

She was left very little time or opportunity, however, in which to review her own conduct; she was too intent on what was passing within. At first she feared she was going to be cheated. The conversation led nowhere. It was quite commonplace and devoid of all mystery.

Then suddenly the truth came out, and she began to tremble from head to foot. Her heart beat so violently that she was afraid she would choke. Her sluggish brain seemed shaken as with an earthquake. Her first impulse was to rush downstairs and tell Taffy—there was always a keen pleasure in being the first with a piece of news.

Then a new thought crept into her brain. Secrets were sometimes valuable. Smut was the man in possession. What would he do? Would he tell

Taffy, and relinquish his name and fortune, or would he lock the secret in his own heart, as his mother had done, and go on as before ?

She was so long considering this question that she came within an ace of being discovered on the door-mat.

.When she had made her sister comfortable for the night she retired herself ; but she could not sleep. She felt that a new condition of things had arisen, and she wondered if in any way she might turn it to her own account. She was not very much troubled that Ruth and Peter had descended to such a piece of deception. Her moral sense was by no means highly developed ; her conscience was of the rudimentary order. She would have done the same thing had she been in their place—that is, if it had occurred to her. Peter had been a much cleverer man than anyone had suspected.

What puzzled her was why her sister should have let the secret out now. It seemed to her that nothing was to be gained by it. Smut was not the kind of man, if she was any judge of character, to give up what he had enjoyed so long. If he did, he was a much bigger fool than she took him to be. She knew very well that if she were in his place she would hold tight to the last. He had only to keep his mouth shut, and no one could touch him.

“No one but me,” she said to herself, with a little gasp. The truth came to her like a flash.

She got out of bed and went across the room and looked at her sister. She was sleeping soundly, and had not moved for the last hour.

Jane’s eyes emitted sparks as she returned to her bed. She was not very intelligent, but she had

a good deal of cunning, and before morning dawned she had decided to play a waiting game.

Smut was as wakeful and restless as his Aunt Jane. He made no attempt to undress until the summer dawn began to steal up into the sky. He sat by the open window, staring out into the night. He knew very well that life and the world could never be the same for him again—that, whatever course he decided upon, there would be sacrifice, bitter and continuous.

He felt very angry with his mother for laying this burden upon him. It seemed the highest form of cruelty to tell him after all these years. Why could she not have kept the secret to the end, as his father had done? Then he would have pursued his way through life in peace and quietness, and nobody would have suffered any inconvenience.

"Just like a woman," he said to himself bitterly, as he stared out into the night. "I suppose she thinks, now, that she has righted the wrong, instead of which she has only added to the wrong—she began by wronging Taffy only, and ended by wronging me as well—and calls it easing her conscience! What a selfish thing human nature is!"

The harsh, dissonant note of a corncrake cleft the silence for a moment, but was not repeated. Not a leaf stirred in the orchard, not a footstep awoke the echoes down on the dusty highway. He was alone with the stars. If he could only awake and find it all a dream! How happy he had been—he had never realised how happy until now. How smoothly and placidly had flowed the river of his life. Now he was suddenly plunged into the rapids, and the angry waters threatened to engulf him.

His one sense of relief was that he would not be called upon to act until his mother was dead; this would give him breathing-time. He would be able to think the matter out in all its bearings. He would have to do the right thing, of course, but he would have to be quite clear in his mind what was the right thing.

Deep down in his heart he knew well enough what he intended to do; but he chose to ignore that fact. Before his mother had finished her confession he had quite made up his mind. But he was keenly anxious to justify himself to himself; unless he could do that there would be no peace for him.

Before he could blazon abroad the wrong and shame of his parents, hold up their names to the contempt of all who knew them, he would have to satisfy his conscience that there was no other course open to him. It was no use trying to right a wrong by committing a greater wrong.

He grew calmer when the stars began to pale and the first flush of dawn crept up into the eastern sky. Half closing the window, he drew down the blind, and, hastily throwing off his clothes, crept into bed.

It was nearly noon when he got down to breakfast. Taffy had been out in the fields since six. The servant-maid was in the back kitchen getting dinner ready. Aunt Jane was upstairs with his mother.

On the table was some cold ham and chicken, and on the hob was a teapot with the lid off. He had only to pour in some boiling water, and tea would be ready.

He was not sorry to be left alone in this way. He had to get used to the new facts and to the

changed conditions. He had a curious feeling of strangeness and remoteness. It was as though he had fallen asleep and awakened some other person. He was still Smut, but he was no longer Ralph Discombe. He was conscious through every fibre of his being that he was the son of Peter and Ruth Longton.

He ate very little breakfast; his brain was too busy. Pushing the plate from him at length, he rose to his feet and walked out of the house. It was a glorious day. A little too hot for comfort, but he was scarcely conscious of the heat. From the fields in all directions came a faint medley of sounds—none of them insistent or distracting—the rumble of a cart, the “Gee woa” of a ploughman, the click of hoes in the turnip field, the twitter of a lark high in the blue, the neighing of a colt down on the moor—all seemed to meet and blend, making the silence audible.

How far away Oxford seemed, and farther away still Ravenscourt and Enid Cuff. He sighed unconsciously. He would never be able to enjoy anything again as he had been in the habit of doing. The world was a changed place for him and life was a different thing. And again the anger grew hot in his heart against his mother.

He had not stopped to inquire how she was to-day. He had no wish to see her again. She had spoiled his life, made the future all the more terrible by contrast with the past. The wrong she had done to Taffy was as nothing compared with the wrong she had done to him. Whatever course he took, he would be the sufferer to the end of the journey.

He came face to face with Taffy at length, who

was returning to dinner, and very handsome he looked, in spite of his shabby clothes.

"Trying to get an appetite?" Taffy questioned, with a smile.

"No. The fact is, I've only just had my breakfast."

"Oh! Had a bad night?"

"Rather. The truth is, the silence keeps me awake. When I did get to sleep, however, I slept soundly and long."

"Seen mother this morning?"

"No. She appears to be asleep."

"You will not be staying long, I suppose?"

"No. I think I shall go back to-morrow. You see, I am only in the way here, and I can do no good by staying."

"I'm afraid we are dull company for you; but it was awfully kind of you to come down. I am sure seeing you has done her good."

"You have seen her to-day?"

"Early this morning, and she had had an excellent night—better than for weeks past."

"I shall be seeing her again before I return," Smut remarked, and then turned his face toward the downs.

Late in the afternoon he found himself once more in the sick-room. Ruth lay very still, with her eyes half closed. She was no longer eager or restless or excited. She said she felt better than she had done for weeks past, but to Smut's unprofessional eyes she seemed very much weaker.

He was very much afraid that she would want to play the part of affectionate parent, and he hated all demonstrations of that kind. To his great relief,

however, she made no such attempt. In truth, she was so far down among the shadows that nothing mattered to her very much. With her confession of the night before, she had given up everything. Until that time she had fought for life, but with that task done, her hands relaxed. She had nothing more to fight for, nothing more to live for.

"Will you be going back soon?" she questioned wearily.

"To-morrow morning," he answered. "You see, I am only in the way here."

"You have said nothing to Taffy yet?"

"No; of course not."

"You said you would wait till—till——"

"Yes! yes!" he interrupted hastily. "Don't let it trouble you."

"And you told me last night that you forgave me."

"Of course I did."

"I am your mother, you know," she whispered slowly; "nothing can alter that fact."

He did not reply, and for a long time there was silence in the room.

"I know you think," she went on at length, "that—that—I ought to have kept it to myself. But I couldn't. I was bound to tell. I nearly sent for the vicar a week ago."

He started and his cheeks blanched suddenly. "But you didn't tell him?" he questioned.

"No; I have told no one but you."

"You did wisely in sending for me," he said at length. "It would be a great mistake to tell anyone else."

"You will be wiser than your mother, and braver,"

she whispered, smiling feebly. "Wrong-doing brought us prosperity, but it robbed us of all peace. You, Smut, you have education. Your father and I were poor and ignorant. You will do differently, for you are wiser."

He shifted uneasily in his chair while she talked, but he made no reply. It was too late now to upbraid her, to complain of the cruel burden she had laid on his shoulders. He had told her that he had forgiven her, but there was little heart in his words. He fancied sometimes he would never forgive her—the wrong she had done him was too great.

He was up early next morning, and caught the first train. He was glad to get away. The place was like a nightmare. He felt as though he would choke if he stayed much longer. He had tried to think and plan, but his brain would not work in such an atmosphere. He would need time and change and congenial surroundings. Back at Ravenscourt he would be able to get his bearings.

Aunt Jane came back after seeing Smut drive away, and seated herself by her sister's bedside.

"Well, he's gone," she said sharply. "He's too much of a gent to stay here long."

"Smut has been brought up a gentleman," Ruth whispered feebly.

"'Brought up' ain't nothing. What is he at bottom? No better than you or me, that's what I say."

"We're all equal in God's sight," Ruth whispered.

"That's my doctrine, Ruth, and I sticks to it. But why on earth do you call him Smut?"

"It was a nickname a servant we had gave to him when he was only about two."

"Did she give Taffy his name also?"

"Yes; she nicknamed them both, and somehow the names have stuck."

"Was that after Taffy got lost?"

"Oh, no; she wasn't with us then. She left us, the day before."

"What was her name?"

"Eliza Veal; but she's got married since."

"Oh!"

"She married a man by the name of Tamblyn, and went to live at Bigley. But why do you ask all these questions, Jane?"

"Oh, nothing. I was only thinking how curious it was that a young man should be called Smut."

"Oh, but that is only when we are among ourselves," Ruth answered feebly.

"I suppose your old servants never come back to see you after they leave?" Jane questioned insinuatingly.

"Not many of them. Susan Whipp has called once or twice. She came, you know, the very night Taffy got lost."

"And Eliza Veal—Tamblyn, that is, now—has she ever been to see you?"

"No; I don't think so. You see, she lives such a long way off."

"It's a decent girl you have at present, but slow."

"You must not forget, Jane, there's a lot of work in this house. I think Amelia does very well."

"A bit slow, as I said," and Jane got up and left the room.

A broad smile overspread her face directly she got into the passage. "I'd better write that down before I forget," she said to herself, and a look of cunning crept into her small, grey eyes.

Getting a pen and a piece of paper, she wrote, in a cramped, illiterate hand: "Eliza Tamblyn—was Veal before she got wed. Live at Bigley. Knowed which was which when she nicknamed them." Then, folding the paper, she put it carefully away in her purse.

"I don't think I shall tell Ned," she reflected; "at least, not yet. He'd be after him right away, and spoil the game. Besides, whatever he got he'd spend it on himself. Men is that selfish. No; I reckon I know what I'm after. Ruth had her pickings a good many years. Now it's time I had my turn."

Jane's brain had never worked so rapidly as during the last twenty-four hours; and, as it happened, everything was turning out just as she had anticipated. She had been a little anxious at first as to what Smut might do. She had heard of people sacrificing their best interests for the sake of what they called honour. She did not understand such people herself—it was a species of foolishness with which she had no sympathy. Still, such people existed, especially among those who thought a good deal of themselves, who had been to college, and all that kind of thing, and there was just a possibility that Smut might have imbibed notions of that kind, and would think it his duty to tell the truth and give up everything.

She did not think it at all likely, however. It was scarcely conceivable that a son of her sister

and Peter Longton would do anything so foolish. She would feel nothing but contempt for him if he did.

When Smut took his departure she smiled to herself in a complacent and self-satisfied way. If he intended to make it right with Taffy, he would have stayed till his mother died. It seemed clear to her that he had decided to say nothing about the matter.

"And he thinks he's the only one as knows," she reflected; and she smiled a crooked and slightly malicious smile. "Ah, well, we shall see."

CHAPTER VII

A CHANCE MEETING

AFTER Smut's departure Ruth sank rapidly. She was scarcely conscious of it herself. She had no pain, and she assured her sister that she felt a good deal better. At tea-time, when Taffy went up to see her, he found her in a state of collapse, and he at once saddled his horse and rode off to Blakeney to fetch the doctor.

On his return he rode more slowly, the doctor having gone on ahead of him. It was a lovely evening, and all the wide stretch of country was clad in its summer dress. In the west great bars of brilliantly-lighted clouds stretched across the horizon. Such a display of colour he had rarely seen, and he permitted his horse to drop into its slowest pace while he watched the flooding sunset paint anew every few moments the wide-spreading canvas of the west.

Suddenly the sound of horses' hoofs fell on his ear, and, turning round in his saddle, he noticed that a horsewoman was quickly gaining on him, while some distance behind trotted a groom.

"Sir John's daughter, I expect," he said to himself, and he turned his face again toward the brilliantly-lighted sky.

As the sound of hoofs drew nearer he pulled his own horse in a little that the riders might pass. He was not interested in Sir John Merton's daughter. She was not a favourite in the neighbourhood. With

people of her own class she might be sweet and amiable enough—probably she was—but with people whom she considered her social inferiors she was distinctly ungracious.

Now and then she condescended to recognise Taffy, if she met him at church or in the village, but that would be when Sir John was with her. She did not recognise her father's tenants when she was alone.

Taffy did not turn his head again. She would trot past him as she had often done, and would pass out of his sight and out of his thoughts.

To his surprise, however, the rider came up on the near side, and, turning his head, he found himself face to face with Sheila Leyland. For a moment his heart seemed to leap into his throat. He was not aware that she was in the neighbourhood, and for weeks past he had been trying to put her out of his thoughts and out of his life.

He knew how foolish it was to let his thoughts dwell upon one who was so completely out of his reach. Nothing could come of it but pain and disappointment, and perhaps lifelong discontent.

She was beautiful, no doubt, and gracious, with a smile and a pleasant word for everyone. She had also shown some little interest in him—but that was the merest accident. She had been greatly amused at his wearing the sixpence she had given him, and had apologised for her mistake in the most delightful way. Beyond that, however, there was nothing—absolutely nothing. She was almost as much out of his world as if she dwelt on the planet Mars.

To do him justice, he cherished no illusion. He had too much common sense for that. He recognised

his own limitations, and fought with a foolish fancy very bravely. Nevertheless, the influence of Sheila Leyland remained a very potent factor in the shaping of his life.

If an ideal is a helpful and an inspiring thing; then, in a very real sense, Sheila became his inspiration. He could not win her—hope never carried him to such a pitch as that—but could he not be worthy of her? Could he not so conduct himself that, in spite of the difference in their social positions, she might still be his friend?

If he could have remained at that point he might still have been happy, but he found out a little later that idealising meant idolising. She became his divinity and the very centre of his universe. She filled his thoughts when he should have been thinking of other things. He became restless and discontented, and sometimes a little irritable.

So he set himself, with a good deal of courage and determination, to put her out of his thoughts; and during the last week or two she had been a less distracting element than for some time previously. That was owing, partly no doubt, to the serious turn his foster-mother's illness had taken, and, during the last few days, to the visit of Smut.

Yet now, as he looked into her sweet, smiling eyes, like a flash it was borne in upon his brain how futile was all his striving. He loved this woman, and perhaps—with the perversity of human nature—loved her all the more because she was so completely out of his reach. It was foolishness, no doubt—ay, worse than foolishness, it was madness. Unless he got the better of such a passion, it would spoil his whole life.

Sheila was the first to speak. "I thought I could not be mistaken," she said. "I hope your mother is better."

"She is much weaker," he answered quietly. "I have just sent on the doctor to see her."

"I am sorry!" and there was a tone of sympathy in her voice that went straight to his heart. Then, after a moment, she added, "She will get well, of course?"

"Oh, no," and he turned his eyes again toward the glowing west. "We gave up that hope long since."

"I did not know. I am so sorry."

"Perhaps I ought not to be so anxious to keep her," he said, as if thinking aloud. "Of late she has suffered a great deal, and just now she is entirely helpless. I think she wants to be at rest."

For awhile they rode on side by side in silence. In spite of his trouble, he could not help glancing at her every now and then. She looked very charming in her riding habit and bowler hat, and brought very vividly back to his memory the day they first met, and she gave him what he called his "lucky" sixpence.

He could not help wondering why it was that, in spite of his judgment and common sense and all his efforts to keep control of his affections, she should have so completely dominated him. It was not that she was more beautiful than other women, or more generous, or more clever. He knew little about her abilities or attainments. There was something beyond all this. Something that spoke directly from her soul to his.

People said that love was the result of propinquity.

It might be so in some cases. But his love had grown without contact or encouragement. It was like a seed dropped into his heart by an invisible hand, and it had flourished without care or tendance.

That she was beautiful in his eyes goes without saying. But her goodness and sweetness he felt. He knew by a sudden intuition that she was all his heart could desire. No woman could have eyes like hers, so deep and frank and clear, and be a hypocrite or a cynic.

And yet even this was no explanation. There were other women just as fair and just as sweet, and yet they made no appeal to him. Women he had known from their girlhood, and he had nothing but praise for them, but not one of them had caused the least tremor of his heart.

Yet directly he came face to face with Sheila Leyland it was as though an electric current went through him, thrilling him to his very finger-tips. It had been so every time they met. It was so again to-day.

He tried to appear indifferent and at his ease as he rode slowly by her side, but his blood was tingling through every vein and fibre of his being. The glance of her soft brown eyes made his heart leap into his throat. Her voice—rich and soft—echoed like music through every cell in his brain.

He forgot all about the sick woman whom he called his mother. This was one of the rare moments that came now and then into his life, when all painful things were forgotten. He was in the fairyland of romance and ideality, a mystical upper world, beyond the reach of earth's sordid care and stress, where love alone reigned supreme.

The low music of her voice brought him back again to earth.

"Do you ever wonder what lies beyond the sunset?"

He turned and looked at her, with the glow of the west on her vivid face.

"Often."

"It must be very beautiful out yonder. Perhaps your mother will soon know."

"She deserves heaven, if anyone does," he answered slowly. "She has been a good woman."

"I like to hear a man speak well of his mother," she said, with a smile, but without looking at him.

"Perhaps all men are not so fortunate," he replied, and he sighed unconsciously.

"You will miss her very much if she is taken from you."

"I shall be alone," he answered, "utterly and absolutely alone. Can you imagine what that will mean? I cannot yet. I shrink from facing it. To a young man without brothers or sisters, his mother stands for everything, especially when he has no father. I shall be like a vessel torn from its moorings in a gale. Please pardon me. I have no right to worry you with my forebodings."

"You do not worry me at all," she answered slowly, her eyes still fixed on the western sky. "It is nice of you to speak to me. Perhaps you do not know that I have no mother?"

"No; I did not know."

"I do not even remember her," she went on. "I often wonder what it must be like to have a real mother. Of course, my stepmother is very good to

me, and all that, but she has children of her own—much younger than I.”

“I think you told me you were coming to live in this neighbourhood?”

“We have nearly decided on a house. I have ridden over to see it this afternoon. Father-wants to be within easy reach of Uncle John, and so do I.”

They had reached the little village of Milor by this time, and the western sky was hidden behind a cluster of houses and tall trees. To the left was the church, with its square, short tower, and beyond the churchyard was the vicarage—the only important house in the village. A line of yew trees overhung the churchyard wall and loomed black against the amber sky. At the end of the village was the schoolhouse, so well remembered by Taffy—the scene of many a game and rout and stand-up fight. It seemed only yesterday since he and Smut used to tramp the distance from Crowdale Farm twice every day, Saturdays excepted, for on Sunday they went to the Sunday school. A thousand memories crowded in upon his brain as he walked his horse slowly past the gabled weather-stained building. He could not help wondering what the future had in store for him. At present there was little to expect or even hope for. The years brought no change or promise of change. Life on a farm was a yearly repetition of the same things. There was no scope for enterprise, no room for ambition.

And some day the fair creature who rode silently by his side would meet her mate, and would pass out of his little world as suddenly as she had come into it, and he would be left with the memory of a

hope that was not a hope—the memory of a dream, rather, a dream that, by the irony of circumstances, could never be anything else.

He turned uneasily in his saddle and glanced again at his companion. Her face was in shadow now. The sun had disappeared behind the downs that stretched north and south beyond Crowdale Farm. The crimson had faded into palest pink and the ochre into amber. On the edge of the down was a rugged line of gold, broken by crags and boulders, and below, the mists were already creeping down.

A few hundred yards beyond the village the park gates came into sight. The house was hidden behind a wide belt of trees.

"I hope you will find your mother better," Sheila said, breaking a long silence.

"Yes," he said, a little awkwardly. "It is good of you to think of her."

"I should like to call, but perhaps a strange face would distress her."

"I do not think so. But please do not trouble yourself so much."

"It would be no trouble at all. But here we are at the parting of the ways."

The groom rode up and pushed open the gate, and Sheila rode slowly through.

She turned as the gate swung back behind her horse and smiled. He raised his hat, and held it for a moment in his hands. The next moment she was hidden behind the lodge, and he was alone.

His horse broke into a trot, scenting the stable a mile away.

The road lay in shadow. Milor Park skirted it

for a quarter of a mile. The light was fading swiftly out of the sky, a deep depression began to settle upon his spirits. He heaved an unconscious sigh, and gathered up the reins a little more tightly.

After a few minutes a stern expression settled on his face and his eyes became hard and cold. What had he to do with day-dreams and foolish fancies? Fate, or Providence, had called him to a sterner lot. If he had only been favoured as Smut had been.

And suddenly the material world vanished again, and he was once more in the realm of fancy. With Smut's fortune and education, with Smut's privileges and opportunities, what a life he could carve out for himself! What dreams would come true, what hopes would be realised! He would woo Sheila Leyland with all the strength of his nature—ay, and he would win her, too. He would build a home for her such as lovers delight in. He would surround her with every comfort and luxury. He would strive in realms where his talents could find scope, and make a name such as she would be proud of.

Oh, given such opportunities as Smut enjoyed, and life would be worth living indeed, and the world a fairyland of beauty. But, because he was poor and untrained, his hopes and ambitions must remain unrealised. He must drift by the very necessities of life in the stagnant backwaters, and lie still and rot, only hearing from afar the laughter and song of those who were in mid-stream.

He came to himself with a start at length. His horse had come to a standstill at the farmyard gate. He was back from dreamland in a moment, and in the hard world of reality.

He found the doctor just on the point of leaving.

There was considerable improvement in the condition of the patient, but, of course, it was only temporary. How long she might live it was impossible to say.

He spent a few minutes by her bedside, but she seemed quite indifferent to his presence. Her heart was with Smut, though she knew she would never see him again.

After supper he put on his hat and went out for a walk. The house was oppressively hot, the air heavy and stagnant. He wanted to feel the cool breath of the down and be encompassed by the silence of the fields.

The dew lay heavy on the grass, and overhead a full moon swam in an almost cloudless sky. To right and left the cornfields rustled gently and fitfully, and now and then the harsh and dissonant cry of the corn-crake broke upon the silence. In front the massed ridges of the down rose weird and forbidding.

He pushed his way onward, passing at length the boundary of the fields, and entering the wild realm of gorse and heather. He had no particular object in view. He was just restless, and the silence and loneliness of these untamed uplands suited his mood.

The air became cooler the higher he ascended, the call of the corn-crakes receded farther and farther into the distance. Rising out of a dark mass of trees and corn mows, he could see the slated roof of his home, glistening brightly in the white moonshine. Farther away everything lay in shadow.

He reached the summit at length, and sat down to rest in the shadow of "Deadman's Rock," a huge mass of granite that looked as if it had been dropped there out of the sky. Near him a tiny rivulet tinkled

musically in the darkness, and now and then the heather whispered as the wind passed over it. From a distant tor an owl called across the silence. No other sound reached him as he sat there brooding. Below him, a little to the left, the dark mass of wood that surrounded Milor Hall lay wrapped in the white mystery of the summer night. Sheila Leyland was there, and his heart leaped again as he recalled the meeting of that afternoon.

It was foolish to dream of her, he knew, but he could not help it. He closed his eyes, and, to his love-illumined fancy, she came and sat by his side, and her small white hand stole into his. How beautiful she was, how perfect the oval of her face, how deep the wells of her liquid eyes. If only——

He started suddenly to his feet. "What a fool I am," he said to himself, and he commenced at once to descend the rough hillside. He made a bee-line for the farm-house, the roof of which stood out conspicuously in the moonlight.

For the moment he was intent on conquering himself. He would tear the image of Sheila Leyland out of his heart, forget that he had ever seen her, ever spoken to her; forget that he had ever dreamed foolish and impossible dreams. He had no right to be so far from his home at so late an hour, no right to be indulging in idle and distracting fancies. His place was near his mother. She might be asking for him at this very moment, and, if so, what excuse would he have when he returned?

The hillside was fretted by the action of wind and rain into a series of irregular terraces, intersected by narrow and tortuous watercourses and

made treacherous by the slippery nature of the heather.

Suddenly he caught his toe in the tangled roots of some furze bushes. He had been stumbling downward at a great pace, and in trying to save himself from falling head-foremost he dislocated his ankle, rolled over into a deep hollow, and lay for awhile stunned and unconscious.

The pain, however, quickly brought him to himself, and he made an effort to get to his feet, but instantly lay back again with a groan. A little later he tried again, but with the same result. He felt sick and faint, while the pain, if he attempted to move, was unbearable.

Finding, at length, that it was absolutely impossible for him to get out of the deep hollow in which he lay, he began to call for help; but it seemed to him like calling from the bottom of a well. How late it was he did not know—the later the better, in some respects, for it was not likely anyone would come in search of him till morning. So he would have to grin and abide, and hope that daylight would bring relief.

He continued to call, however, on the off-chance that some poacher or stray traveller might hear him, but no one came. The silence was unbroken save for the fitful sighing of the wind in the gorse and heather. High overhead the stars winked at him in cold indifference. The dew soaked him almost to the skin.

He tried to feel as unconcerned as possible, but he could not blind himself to the fact that he was in a very precarious position. He might not be discovered for days. Very few people climbed the down.

Now and then strangers toiled up from Milor for the sake of the view, and occasionally geologists and antiquarians squatted among the tors, but for the most part it was a deserted bit of country, given over to rabbits and lizards. That he had received serious hurts he knew—hurts that might easily prove fatal if too long neglected.

There was no help for it, however. He would have to take his chance. Nothing was left for him but to lie still and wait.

CHAPTER VIII

A SUMMER MORNING

SHEILA LEYLAND was awakened early by the sun blazing into her room. She got up and lowered the blind, and then felt too wide awake to get into bed again. For awhile she toyed with the trinkets on her dressing table, then began to dress slowly and absent-mindedly. Her thoughts reverted to the previous evening when she had a long discussion with her cousin Peggy. Peggy had seen her riding through the village of Milor with Taffy apparently in very deep and earnest conversation, and naturally she took her to task over such a proceeding.

"I do think, Sheila," she said in a tone of reproof, "that when you go out for a ride you should select your companions with more discrimination."

"Why, cousin, what have I done now?" Sheila questioned, lifting her eyes in surprise.

"I say nothing against young Longton as a man—or rather as a farmer!" Peggy said with a curl of her thin lips. "Indeed, I am told he is quite well educated and all that. But he is scarcely the kind of companion you should choose when you go out for a ride."

"I didn't choose him," Sheila answered a little indignantly. "I simply overtook him. He had been to town to send the doctor to his mother."

"Why did he not return with the doctor?"

"I did not ask him. Perhaps he was anxious to spare his horse."

"And get an opportunity of riding with you at the same time."

"What nonsense, Peggy. He did not know I was in the neighbourhood, and if I had not spoken to him I don't suppose he would have recognised me."

"But why did you speak to him, Sheila? You treat him as though he belonged to your own station in life."

"He has always been civil and polite, and why shouldn't I speak to him?"

"In a casual way, of course, I speak to all the poor people in the village. But that is different from riding *tête-à-tête* with a man as though you were on equal terms. By all accounts young Longton has quite big enough notions already, and if he is allowed to—to—well, to fraternise, shall I say, with such as you, there is no knowing what ideas he will get into his head."

Sheila laughed, partly to cover up her annoyance, and partly because she did not know exactly what reply to make.

"I really don't see why you laugh," Peggy continued in hoity-toity tones. "I should have thought that having lived in India as you have done you would have seen the necessity of keeping the inferior classes in their proper place."

"But I don't regard Mr. Longton as belonging to an inferior class," Sheila retorted hotly. "He is an Englishman, and—and—if you will allow me to say it—a gentleman."

It was Peggy's turn to laugh now, and she did it with much gusto and apparent amusement.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Sheila," she said in jerks. "Of course everybody is 'lady' and 'gentleman' nowadays. I heard our washerwoman spoken of the other day as the 'charlady,'" and she laughed again.

Sheila picked up a book that was lying on the table and began to turn the leaves. She felt in no humour to continue a conversation that had grown distasteful to her. She was quite sure that she and Peggy would never agree on the matter. Peggy's theory was that if you kept people at a distance and snubbed them occasionally they would respect you; while if you granted them the smallest concession in the direction of friendliness they would take advantage of it and treat you as though you were no better than themselves.

Such questions, however, did not worry Sheila. She accepted people as she found them. It was not her nature to assume that she was better than her neighbours, or to conclude that a man was a gentleman if he were rich and a clown if he were poor.

During the last year or two she had spent a good deal of time at Milor Hall, and had become acquainted with Taffy in the way already mentioned. That he interested her she frankly admitted—there was no reason why she should hide the fact. It always amused her when she thought of their first meeting and how quite innocently she offered him sixpence for opening the gate and tightening the girths of her saddle. It is true she blushed and felt confused when she discovered that he was the son of Farmer Longton. Nor was her confusion lessened when she learned that he was wearing the unfortunate sixpence on his watch-chain. Nevertheless all this

seemed to create an unconscious bond of sympathy between them. She liked him for accepting the sixpence in the spirit in which it was given. He might have resented it—some men in his circumstances would have done so—or he might have given it to the first urchin he met. That he should take the trouble to bore a hole through it and wear it on his chain touched a tender chord in her nature. It was nice of him, to say the least of it. He possessed the saving grace of humour, and beyond that he possessed a generous disposition.

She had met him several times since—once he had walked quite a mile with her—perhaps more. He had told her a good many things about the people in the neighbourhood, about himself and his mother, about his foster-brother and the considerable fortune he had inherited.

It was all perfectly simple and natural, and it never occurred to her that such an innocent acquaintanceship would be resented by her cousin.

As she stood before the mirror in the cool light of the morning twisting into shape her glorious hair and recalling her conversation with her cousin Peggy, she felt a little inclined to be resentful. It was no business of her cousin's. Did Peggy think——?

"Oh, I hate such snobbery," she said indignantly, and she dabbed a comb into her hair with a good deal of energy.

Had Peggy been a wiser woman she would have seen that the manner of her interference was calculated to frustrate the very end she had in view. Sheila was not the sort of girl to be coerced into any course of action. Moreover, the very fact that Peggy

objected to her speaking to the young farmer gave to him an exaggerated place in her thoughts. The chances were that Taffy would not have been remembered this morning but for Peggy's fatuous talk of the night before; as it was, she could think of nothing else. Her mind strayed back unconsciously to the first meeting, when she asked him to open the gate for her. She scarcely noticed him till she handed him the sixpence, then his manner and bearing struck her in a moment. He was coatless and his arms were bare, but——

Well, of course, it is always easy to distinguish a gentleman from a clown—his smile, his accent, his few words of thanks. She saw that she had made a mistake; but there was nothing more to be said or done, so she rode away, glad to hide her burning cheeks.

Peggy, of course, did not see the matter as she did. Peggy thought that Sheila had behaved quite properly and generously. Had Taffy been an ordinary farm labourer a reward of twopence would have been ample, but being a farmer's son she had no doubt done quite right in giving him sixpence.

Sheila went downstairs at length only to find an empty house. Not a servant was stirring. She did not wonder when she looked at the clock on the dining-room mantelpiece. She leaned against the sideboard and laughed. What should she do till breakfast-time?

The sun was blazing in through the bars of the venetian blinds, and outside the birds were singing their loudest.

"Oh, I will get out of doors," she said to herself. "It will be delicious in the cool of the morning."

Besides, a good long ramble will give me an appetite for breakfast."

Thoughts of breakfast, however, made her feel hungry, and she started out at once on a foraging expedition. When she emerged at length into the open air she was munching a thick ham sandwich and enjoying it immensely.

"It's just delightful to behave oneself like an uncivilised Christian," she said to herself laughing. "I wonder why we don't go back to a state of primitive barbarism every now and then just for the fun of it."

The sun had already sucked up the dew except in the shade of the trees, the flowers were exhaling their most delicious perfume, the birds were making a perfect din in the woods, the air was cool and clear.

Passing the greenhouses she looked at the rich clusters of grapes ripening under the glass, and decided that later in the day she would ask her uncle to allow her to take a bunch to poor Mrs. Longton.

A few minutes later she was making straight for the "down" which rose steeply in front. The joy of life was thrilling her through every nerve. It was good to be alive, good to feel the sunshine and sniff the pungent odours that rose from the earth.

Away to the left stretched the cornfields of Crowdale Farm, yellowing rapidly under the July sun and beyond a wide stretch of fertile country losing itself at length in a purple haze. Crowdale farm-buildings were quite isolated; no other house was in sight save Milor Hall—the village of Milor was hidden by trees.

She paused for a few moments at the foot of the down and looked back, then turned her face once

more toward Deadman's Rock that frowned above her. She had not been near it since she was a child. There was really not much to see—just a little wider view of the country and in clear weather a glimpse of the sea—that was all. But the air was always cool on the top. If a breeze blew anywhere it played around those lonely tors.

She ascended slowly, pausing every now and then to examine some sprig of heather or moorland flower. Already the bees were out, foraging industriously for honey. Tiny butterflies with pale-blue wings flitted aimlessly hither and thither, lizards basked in the eye of the sun, a robin was twittering not far away on a stunted thorn.

It really was delightful to be out and about before the world was stirring. How much better than dozing in bed and getting up late with a headache and with no appetite for breakfast. Really those who slept through the early morning missed the best portion of the day.

She did not know how time was speeding, for she had left her watch on the dressing table. She was scarcely conscious of anything for the moment, except the mere joy of existence. She was young and strong and hopeful. The world was a beautiful place, and life a delightful thing. Every sense was awake and satisfied. For the eye there was light and form and colour and harmony. For the ear there were soft airs breathed by the wind and tinkled by a rivulet that was flowing somewhere not far away; and for the nostrils there were the rich thymey odours that were rising from mother earth. But for her desire to reach Deadman's Rock and get back to the Hall in time for breakfast she would have

stretched herself on the ling and heather and given herself up to the pure enjoyment of the morning's solitude. She had never felt herself before so akin to nature, so much in harmony with the wide-open, unspoiled country.

Suddenly she paused and looked swiftly round her. She fancied she heard a human voice, but evidently she was mistaken. No one was in sight. Even the fields below were still deserted.

She began to climb a little more rapidly. While she had been loitering and dreaming time had been passing. The sun was now high in the heavens. She could afford to waste no more time watching lizards and picking wild flowers.

Ah ! there was the same sound again ; surely it was a human voice and not far from her either. She began to feel a little bit afraid. She was a mile away from the nearest house, and there was not a soul in sight.

She placed her hand to her side and listened intently. There could be no mistake this time. Someone was calling, but in a voice so feeble and uncertain that she could not distinguish what was said.

Her fears vanished as rapidly as they came. Making her way across a wide slope of heather she came in a very few minutes to the edge of a deep hollow, at the bottom of which lay Taffy, so racked with pain as to be barely conscious of his surroundings.

It took her scarcely a moment to scramble to his side. All her womanly sympathies were awake in an instant. He was evidently hurt, had probably lain there all the night, and had called for help in vain through the long, dark hours. What a fortunate thing she

had come that way and come so early. But for this accident of early rising on her part, this impulse to climb once more to the top of the down, he might have had to lie untended no one could tell how long.

A little shudder ran through her as these thoughts passed through her brain.

"You are hurt," were her first words, and she dropped suddenly on her knees by his side and took his right hand in both hers.

The colour came back to his cheeks in a moment. The touch of her soft hands sent the blood coursing like wine through all his veins. He knew she was scarcely aware what she was doing, that it was the unconscious expression of her sympathy. He was afraid to move his hand, afraid almost to speak lest the spell of her touch should be broken.

"I fear I have broken my ankle," he said at length. "I slipped in the dark——"

"You have lain here all night?"

"Yes."

"What you must have suffered."

"It has been rather bad," he said with a wry smile; "especially the thirst."

She dropped his hand suddenly and sprang to her feet. "There's water quite near," she said, and she puckered her forehead as though in great perplexity.

"I've heard it tinkling all the night," he answered with the same wry smile; "that's been the maddening part of it."

"And I've nothing in which to fetch you a drop," she said dejectedly. "Oh——"

She placed her two small hands together and looked at the hollow. "I fear I should spill every drop before I got here," she said ruefully; "but I

can try." And she disappeared over the bank before he could utter another word.

She appeared again after a few moments and crept slowly down the bank holding her hands before her so as to form a cup; but by the time her hands reached his lips only a few drops remained; but those drops were infinitely sweet, and he showed his gratitude in his eyes.

She shook her head a little dolefully. "I am afraid I must leave you to your thirst and run for help," she said. "You must be patient a little longer."

"If you could only fetch me a few more drops," he said pleadingly.

She plucked a kid glove from her belt with sudden inspiration and held it up before him.

"Would you mind drinking out of my glove?" she said.

"Mind?" and his eyes filled.

She was off again like a shot, and he waited impatiently for her return.

Her eyes were sparkling when she again appeared over the bank and her lips parted, showing two rows of white, even teeth.

She came to his side in a rush, for the improvised water-bottle was dripping at the end of each finger.

"Open your mouth," she cried; and the next moment he was nearly choked.

"I'm sorry I poured it so fast," she said, doing her best to repress a smile. "I didn't know my glove held so much. May I fill it again?"

"If you please."

"I made it as clean as I could," she said as she disappeared over the bank a third time.

"I never tasted so delicious a draught," he said after he had drained the glove once more.

A third and a fourth time she filled it for him, then helping him into a somewhat easier position, she set out for Crowdale Farm.

She could not help wondering, as she scrambled down the steep hill-side, what her cousin Peggy would think when she got to know. There seemed a kind of fatality about her meetings with Taffy, and the curious thing was that it was always she who led the advance—unwittingly, of course. She had no idea when she set out on her ride the day before that she would overtake him on her journey back, and less idea that she would meet him when she started on her early morning expedition.

Her eyes became very grave and thoughtful as she hurried across the fields in the direction of the farm-house. She could not help feeling interested, and more than that, she could not help feeling troubled. Misfortune always appealed to her. A story of trouble always awoke a responsive echo in her heart.

That this accident would mean serious loss to the young farmer was evident. Harvest was drawing near, his mother was ill, and everything inside the house and outside would have to be left to the care of strangers. It was no concern of hers, of course. Misfortune was the common lot of most people, and if she worried over the affairs of every chance acquaintance she would have no time for anything else. But in spite of this attempted matter-of-fact way of looking at things, the weight on her heart increased rather than diminished.

She was quite out of breath and almost exhausted

when she reached the house. Aunt Jane and the servant-maid were just beginning to stir. Taffy had not been missed; it was his habit to go out on the farm before breakfast, and it had not occurred to either of them that he had been out all night. They had not noticed that his bed had not been slept in. That he had not returned when they retired the previous night was not a matter that gave them a moment's anxiety. He often went out after supper and did not return till all the others had gone to bed.

So it happened that Aunt Jane and Amelia went about their work as usual and without a thought of the further trouble that was impending.

CHAPTER IX

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

TAFFY submitted to the inevitable, as most strong men submit, in silence. Nothing was to be gained by whimpering. Misfortune had laid him on his back, and he would have to make the best of it—grin and abide, choke back his impatience and chagrin by sheer force of will. How desperate he felt at times no one knew. The trouble could not have come to him at a more inopportune time. All hands were wanted on the farm. He ached to get out of doors and see how matters were going on, and yet here he was a prisoner, and would have to remain one for nobody knew how long.

His bed was downstairs in the parlour. It was found impossible to carry him upstairs when he was brought home. He could never forget the agony of that journey. The farm hands bore him as gently as they could, but every step was torture. Sheila Leyland walked by his side all the way. He would have shrieked but for her. Her presence was like balm to him; her smile was a benediction.

She did not trouble herself that she would be missed at the Hall, and that there would be consternation at her long absence. She forgot that she had had no breakfast. It seemed to her a duty she could not ignore, to see Taffy safely in his own house. She did not reason about the matter. She followed a blind impulse. She had discovered him, and that

fact established a kind of right and gave her a certain authority. She must see the matter through to the end.

Taffy blessed her a thousand times—not merely for her kindness and generosity. She was so capable, so resourceful, so strong. The clumsy farm hands would have tortured him beyond endurance if left to their own devices. But she knew exactly what should be done and how it should be done. Her lessons in “first aid” stood her in good stead. It was she who got the splints and bandaged his foot before any attempt was made to lift him out of the hollow in which he lay. It was she who gave directions how he should be carried, and saw that those directions were followed. All the way home she walked by his side, giving orders to rest every now and then when she saw the jolting was more than he could bear, and occasionally speaking a word of encouragement to him.

Taffy watched her with growing wonder and reverence. She had captivated his heart before by her beauty and sweetness, but her sympathy and kindness now made him wholly hers. He would be her slave to the end of his life, and would ask no higher reward than that he might be permitted to serve her.

Once, in a moment of comparative ease, he wondered if she had any conception what her kindness meant to him; but he banished the thought almost as quickly as it came. It was just her nature to do generous deeds, and she would never think of anything beyond—least of all, that a man in his station of life would ever presume to fall in love with her.

There was bitter irony in the situation. Strange that the gentle hand that bound up his wounds should break his heart, that the sympathy that soothed to-day should torture to-morrow.

It was well she did not know. Every now and then he opened his eyes and looked up into her face. Now and then their eyes met, but he kept himself well in hand, and permitted himself no revealing glance. Her eyes were deep wells of sympathy. She looked at him quite frankly. There was no thought in her mind save that he was suffering, and that it was her place to help him all she could.

It was very pleasant to her to play the part of Good Samaritan—she was glad that she had found him; perhaps she had been the means of saving a fellow-creature's life. But for her he might have lain where he fell and died, for none of the farm hands would dream of searching for him there.

The doctor arrived before she left the farmhouse, and then she made her way slowly in the direction of Milor Hall. She was conscious now that she had had nothing to eat since that early sandwich. She felt more tired and exhausted than she had done for many a long day. But there was a great peace in her heart. She had done her duty, and duty had brought its own reward.

She expected that she would be roundly rated by Peggy when she showed her face. Nor was she disappointed. Peggy was frankly indignant, and even Sir John showed his annoyance at her long absence. It was very thoughtless of her to be away so long without informing anyone. At any rate, she might have sent someone with a message.

"But there was no one whom I could send,

Uncle," she explained. "Every hand was wanted, and you know poor Mrs. Longton is not expected to live many days."

"Yes, yes. But it was a little bit thoughtless of you, all the same. We have been really quite concerned."

"I am very sorry, Uncle. But what could I do?"

"Surely, when you had conveyed the message that the young fellow had got hurt, your duty was done?"

"I did not think so at all. And you would not have thought so had you been there. You have no idea how helpless these farm hands are. They hadn't the ghost of an idea how to act."

"Indeed? And you instructed them, eh?" And he laughed harshly and shrugged his shoulders.

She flushed hotly and hung her head. It hurt her that her kindness should be misconstrued. But her uncle's comparatively mild rebuke was as nothing compared with Peggy's cynical chatter. Peggy told her without any waste of words that she strongly disapproved of such carryings-on; that it was most unbecoming and unladylike; that she was forgetting her dignity as well as the position held by her relatives; that when gentry condescended to the middle classes as she was doing, such condescension was certain to be taken advantage of; with a good deal more to the same effect.

Sheila listened for the most part without replying. She could not see things from Peggy's standpoint, and, what was more, she did not want to. If life was to be narrowed down to the insignificant ledge on which Peggy poised herself, it would not be worth the living. Peggy seemed to her like a per-

former on a tight-rope. She dared not think of anything outside herself lest she lost her balance. She was constantly on the watch lest her dignity should suffer. To do anything unconventional was not to be thought of: it would be like breaking all the Commandments.

When Peggy got on her "high horse," Sheila deemed it wise to be silent. Nevertheless, her cousin's allusions to the young farmer proved to be so irritating that she was bound now and then to interpose a word.

"It was only yesterday you were riding with him," Peggy said, with a little snort.

"Well?"

"Went out in the moonlight to dream about you, very likely. Let us hope it will be a warning to him."

"What nonsense you talk, Peggy!"

"You needn't pretend to be so wise, my child. You don't know these country people. I do. Give them a yard, and they take an ell. Really, it is quite a nice little romance. You will visit him, of course?"

"I shall call and inquire, in any case."

Peggy drew herself up with dignity. "If you take my advice, Sheila, you will do no such thing," she said in her severest tones.

"Really, Cousin Peggy!"

"I mean it," and she turned and walked out of the room.

Sheila got a book and tried to read, but in a very few moments the letters swam before her eyes. Peggy's irritating and inconsequential words still rang in her ears, while Taffy's face constantly floated before her mental vision. She felt, in a vague and

undefined way, that if her interest in the young farmer should ever grow beyond that of mere neighbourliness, it would be largely the fault of her cousin. Why should Peggy suggest things that would never otherwise occur to her ?

It was all very horrid and very stupid that one was not allowed to act in a rational and neighbourly way without being pulled up at every step by some foolish conventionality.

It had been in her mind to run over to Crowdale Farm again that evening on her bicycle. She meant to take Ruth Longton a bunch of grapes and make inquiries as to Taffy's progress at the same time, but Peggy's onslaught had undecided her. Of course, she was quite free to do as she liked. Neither her uncle nor Peggy had any right to control her actions ; on the other hand, something was due from her as their guest. They had always been very kind to her, and she was bound by all the rules of hospitality to consider their wishes and even their whims.

In the end she decided not to go to Crowdale again that day. It was a lesson in self-repression, and possibly she profited by it, though that is doubtful. It is of the essence of human nature to desire things that are forbidden. Her thoughts strayed away to the lonely farmstead thrice as frequently as they would have done if Peggy had not interfered.

On the following morning Peggy announced a shopping expedition to Blakeney, with visits to two or three people, which would fill up the day. Sheila raised her eyebrows in surprise.


"I could not tell you yesterday," Peggy explained.

"I did not quite make up my mind till after you went to bed."

Sheila did not reply, but she saw clearly enough her cousin's motive. Peggy rather prided herself on her cleverness, but in truth she was as simple-minded and transparent as a child.

They drove away in an open landau soon after breakfast. Peggy was in the best of humours and bubbling over with self-satisfaction. No allusion was made to the events of the previous day, and Sheila was careful not to utter a word of criticism on the day's programme. But there is often very little connection between a person's thoughts and his speech. Sheila chatted freely enough about nothing in particular, but her thoughts all the time were somewhere else. Peggy, by her inept interference, was compelling her to think more about Taffy than she would otherwise have done.

She read Peggy's mind like a book. Peggy was saying, in effect: "Sheila is young and inexperienced and romantic. She has no proper conception of what is due to one in her station in life. She is tainted with the heresy that all men are equal, and that character is the only true test of a man's worth. If allowed to go her own way, she would mix freely with people much below her in the social scale, provided they are what she calls respectable. She is evidently interested in young Longton. She even spoke of him a couple of evenings ago as a gentleman. He is good looking, no doubt, and has pleasant manners—is, in fact, just the kind of man that would strike an impressionable girl's fancy. This stupid accident and the unfortunate circumstance of her finding him will have deepened her interest.



Girls of her type do not think of a man's position or of what is due to themselves and their friends. Hence Sheila must be guarded. This foolish acquaintance-ship must not be allowed to go any farther. She must be discouraged from making inquiries at the farm."

Sheila read it all as clearly as though it had been printed on the hoardings, and felt not a little indignant in consequence. She protested to herself, quite naturally, that it was not true; that it was the sheerest folly and nonsense; that she would be just as much interested in a dozen other acquaintances if they had met with a similar misfortune.

"Peggy is a silly snob and prude," she said to herself, with an unconscious shrug of the shoulders. "If she thinks she is going to mould me after her pattern, she is mistaken. I'm old enough to look after myself, and when we get back I shall ride across to the farm on my bicycle and make inquiries."

Peggy was in no hurry, however, to get back. After she had done her shopping there were so many calls to make that they barely reached Milor Hall in time for dinner.

Sheila inwardly fumed, though she was careful not to betray any annoyance.

On the following morning about seven o'clock, as Taffy lay staring out of the parlour window and thinking a little dismally of the chances of life, he was startled to see Sheila Leyland pass on her way to the front door. The hospital nurse that had been obtained from Blakeney was taking a nap upstairs, Aunt Jane was with her sister, Amelia was out in the stackyard searching for eggs; there was nothing for

it but for him to answer her knock himself. The front door stood wide open, also the parlour door. He wanted all the fresh air he could get.

"Please come in," he called; and a moment later she stood in the doorway smiling and blushing, and more beautiful than ever.

"Excuse my calling so early," she said hurriedly, and with deepening colour, "but it was my only chance, and I was anxious to know how you are getting on."

"It is good of you," he said, averting his eyes. "You are more than kind. I think I am doing all right. But I fear, from what the doctor says, I shall be a prisoner for several weeks."

"But there will be no permanent injury?" she questioned, looking at him frankly.

"The doctor says not," he answered, raising his eyes to hers. "Oh, no; I shall be a bit lame for a while. But won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. I must not stay long," and she seated herself near the foot of his bed. "I hope your mother is no worse?"

"Aunt Jane thinks she is a little better. My accident seems to have given her a new interest."

"I meant to have brought her some grapes, but it was too early to get them——"

"Perhaps you will call again?" he interrupted, blushing.

"Oh, yes, I intend to," she answered with delightful candour; "that is, if you will let me."

"Let you?" and he turned his head and looked out of the window. "If you knew how the hours drag. I seem to have lain here ages already."

"I suppose any kind of sickness is more trying

to a man than to a woman. You are so used to being out of doors."

"You see, the trouble is I feel all right in myself," he went on. "If I were really ill I suppose I should not want to move; but to be tethered by this stupid ankle is—well, perhaps you can guess?"

"I think I can. It must be awfully trying."

"You see, the harvest is almost upon us," he continued, "and there are a dozen things that want doing; and workmen are often such slackers when they have the chance. If mother were not ill it would not be so bad."

"But no good can come of worrying." Then she blushed and hesitated. "Pardon such an obvious and commonplace remark," she went on. "I'm afraid I am the last person in the world to preach patience to others—I am so impatient myself."

He glanced up at her suddenly, and their eyes met, and for a moment he seemed to hold her with his strong, penetrating gaze. She turned her head at length, and the warm colour rose slowly, suffusing her neck and face. When she looked at him again his eyes were closed.

Her heart was beating rapidly when she rode back to Milor Hall. She wondered, for the first time, whether she would not have been wiser to have taken Peggy's advice. She was not sure. The sight of suffering gave her pain, and she was by no means certain that she did any good.

She would have to call again to see his mother, as she had promised, but after that—well, perhaps it would be better that the acquaintanceship should come to an end.

She was very silent that morning at breakfast. No one knew that she had been out, and she did not volunteer any information.

"If Peggy asks me, I shall tell her, of course," she said to herself, but Peggy evidently was quite unsuspecting.

Two days later she went across to the farm again, taking with her several delicacies from the Hall, as well as a large bunch of grapes. She asked to see Mrs. Longton, and was admitted to her room; but her stay was very brief—the poor woman was evidently sinking fast.

She did not see Taffy. The nurse told her that he was asleep, and she would not hear of his being awakened; and yet it was with a sense of disappointment she turned away from the house.

When next she called, Ruth Longton lay dead upstairs, and Smut sat in the parlour with Taffy.

CHAPTER X

SPECTRES

SMUT returned to Crowdale at once on receipt of the telegram announcing his mother's death. Taffy hardly expected him; he had been down so recently; and since they had no claim upon him it was scarcely reasonable to suppose that he would tear himself away from his friends a second time.

Smut, however, was very unhappy, and had been ever since his mother's confession. He had been very anxious to get away from Crowdale—the very air of the place seemed to stifle him. His hope was that when he got back to Ravenscourt and could bask again in the light of Enid Cuff's eyes he would forget the painful and annoying experience through which he had passed.

He had quite made up his mind when he left Crowdale that he would keep the secret to himself. It seemed to him too late in the day to attempt to right the wrong that had been committed. There were too many difficulties in the way. It never could be fully righted, however much he might try—human actions were irrevocable. He had better let the matter rest; such unpleasant waters had better not be stirred.

Moreover, the sacrifice was too great. There was a limit to human nature after all; and it was not reasonable to expect that any ordinary individual would give up what he had enjoyed so long and go back to poverty and obscurity. He was not the only

man in the world by a long way who was enjoying what was not rightly his. Possession was nine points of the law—so it was said. The law courts constantly hinted that there were men in possession of large estates who had no moral right to them.

Then there was the good name of his parents to be considered. No one doubted that they had lived honestly through all the years of their toilsome life. Why dig up this one evil deed and expose their shame to the world. It would be an unfilial act and unworthy of any self-respecting son. He was not sure that Taffy, if he knew, would be willing to receive his own at the cost of so frightful an exposure.

Besides all that, Taffy was quite content with his lot. He knew no other life and never dreamed of anything better. To him it was no hardship to have to live in the country. He loved an outdoor life and was cut out for a farmer, as anyone could see.

So with these and similar sophisms he tried to satisfy his conscience, and by the time he reached Ravenscourt he had very largely succeeded in banishing the subject from his mind. His business was to forget it as he would forget some painful dream—perhaps it was a dream. It hardly seemed natural that such a story should be true.

He was in fairly cheerful spirits when he sat down that evening to dinner. It was a pleasure to get into evening clothes again and sit down to a properly appointed table. What a contrast to the humble and homely surroundings of Crowdale Farm. Sir Jonathan believed in treating his guests handsomely. The food was of the best; also the wines. Good cheer was a tradition of Ravenscourt since Sir Jonathan had been in possession.

Smut's spirits gradually rose under the influence of pleasant surroundings. Except this haunting memory which would come back at longer or shorter intervals, there was nothing to cloud his happiness—save, perhaps, a certain undefinable change in Enid Cuff—but even that might be mere fancy. She certainly had seemed a little less gracious on his return than when he went away, and instead of sitting next to him as he had hoped and expected, she was on the other side of the table and was giving all her attention to the latest arrival, the Hon. Walter Butt. That, after all, perhaps, was only natural, and he tried to dismiss the matter from his mind.

After dinner he was one of the first of the men to follow the ladies to the drawing-room. Enid was at the far end with her head bent over some needle-work. In a moment or two he was by her side. She looked up as he approached and then went quietly on with her work.

"You seem very busy this evening," he said a little resentfully.

"Really?" But she did not raise her eyes. He pulled up a chair and sat down. He had not been mistaken then, after all. She really had changed. When he left Ravenscourt she had been as sweet as possible, and he had half made up his mind to propose to her. Now she appeared quite indifferent.

"Have I offended you in any way?" he questioned after an awkward pause.

"Offended me?"—in a tone of surprise—"Oh, dear, no. Why should I be offended?"

"You seem very cool, at any rate," he said in a slight tone of irritation.

"I wish I were cool," she laughed. "I feel almost

baked. Don't you think the weather is frightfully hot?"

"I wasn't thinking about the weather; but no matter. Who is your new visitor?"

"Don't you know him?" raising her eyes with an animated look.

"I never heard of him till this evening."

"His father has just been raised to the Peerage."

"Indeed?"

"Butt, the great brewer, you know. Immensely rich, they say."

"Oh!"

"It must be awfully nice for Watty. You see, he is the Honourable Walter now, and will be Lord Bungford when his father dies."

"And that interests you?"

"Of course it does. We feel quite flattered at having him here."

"I thought you rather despised trade."

"But brewing isn't a trade, surely. At least, it isn't like keeping a grocery or drapery establishment."

"You mean it isn't so respectable?"

"Not so respectable?" and she tittered harshly. "What *are* you talking about?"

"I should say it is much more respectable to provide what is necessary to life and comfort than to manufacture what demoralises and destroys."

"Nobody wants people to drink to excess," she said with some asperity, "least of all the brewers; and surely they are not to blame if a man now and then makes a fool of himself."

"I am not saying they are; but we were talking about the comparative respectability of trade."

"Excuse me; we were talking about the Hon. Walter Butt."

"You are interested in him?"

"Naturally. Who would not be interested in a peer's son. Besides, he's awfully nice. I am sure you will say so when you know him better."

"Oh, I don't doubt for a moment that he's charming."

"Now you are cynical. But here he comes," and she raised at once a bright and eager face.

Smut's good spirits evaporated more rapidly than they had risen. He felt that he had a rival and of the most formidable kind. It was distinctly annoying and humiliating. He had been getting on so well. Enid had shown a distinct liking for his company. They had got—there was no denying it—very near to love-making, and now she seemed to have forgotten all about it. Of course, it might be a mere passing phase, but he was humiliated none the less.

During the rest of the evening he maintained an outward appearance of good humour. He was not so much in love with Enid that he would break his heart over the affair. If Butt ran off with her his pride would suffer more than his affections. Also he did not know any other girl who was likely to have such a dowry as Enid Cuff.

During the night his sleep was considerably broken. Directly the lights were out his thoughts went back again to Crowdale Farm. He thought he had banished the spectre, but there it was grinning more horribly than ever. His brain gathered up all the old arguments and sophistries and laid them out in order. His memory went over all the pros and cons. He assured himself a hundred times over that

no other course was possible to him ; but he found no peace.

Up to the present he had lived an honest life. He had carefully avoided the vices and snares into which a good many young fellows fell. He had rather prided himself on his strength of character. He had never given way to drink or fast living. * He was particular about the company he kept. He was no saint, he knew. He never professed to be one. Still, he did go to church now and then, and he tried to keep the Commandments. That he was indolent was very likely true. Perhaps, also, he was lacking in ambition. That any son of Adam loved work he did not believe. He hated work himself. He loved pleasure, and his one desire in life was to have a good time. He had scraped through "Mods.," but quite expected in the end to fail in Jurisprudence.

That did not trouble him greatly. Of course he would like to get through if it could be done without too much trouble. He hoped also in time to get called to the Bar ; but that was a matter that could wait.

Now, however, temptation had come to him—as it came to his father and mother before him—in its most subtle and insinuating form, and he discovered that he was no stronger than they. In his heart he had yielded at once. He knew what was the right course as well as they did—knew that he would never be able to talk of honour or honesty again.

Strength of character ! Where was it to be found ? At the first blast of temptation he had fallen prone upon his face. He was humiliated to discover how weak he was—how little honour counted with him in comparison with ease and gain. He had scarcely

hesitated a moment—had made no attempt to fight or resist. Knowing that the secret was safe in his own keeping he resolved before he left his mother's side to let the wrong continue.

He had taken no account, however, of the inward voice that we term conscience, and when it lifted up its voice he tried to silence it with sophistries, and for a while he imagined he had succeeded. But when night came on, and the great house was hushed and still, and the stars blinked at him through the window from which he had drawn the blind, he discovered that conscience was more alive than ever, that his whole moral nature was in revolt.

Once he got out of bed and went to the window and stood for a long time looking out into the night. Not a leaf stirred, not even the flutter of a moth disturbed the silence. He was alone with the stars, with himself, with God.

"I would like to do it," he said to himself wistfully, "but I don't think I can. The sacrifice is too great. And yet—and yet—I should be a better man if I could, and perhaps a happier man."

After a while the wind stirred gently as though the night breathed in its sleep. It was scarcely a sigh, and yet Smut shuddered as he stood there listening. Was God speaking to him, or was it his own inner consciousness raising its protest?

He had no doubt as to what was the right course morally and ethically. It was a choice between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, between honesty and dishonesty. If the stakes had not been so high, the price demanded so great, he would have triumphed even now. But poverty, toil, obscurity, the taunt of his parents' shame—

He turned away from the window at length with a big sigh and crept into bed, and a little while later fell asleep.

When morning dawned he felt better. The light drove away the spectres. Reason came into play. Logic—so he said—was more important than sentiment. It was impossible to undo the past, and it was useless to worry about it.

At breakfast Cyril Cuff suggested golf—singles before lunch, a foursome after. Smut was drawn to play with the Hon. Walter. He was sorry, as he wanted to play with Bates—he had taken a dislike to the brewer's son. The match, however, proved a close and exciting one. Butt drove the longer ball, but Smut excelled in *machie* play and won the first hole by an excellent approach shot. At the second hole, however, he got bunkered and Butt had the honour at the third tee. The next three holes were halved, and at the turn Smut was one down.

Butt proved a most genial and fair opponent. There was, however, little time for conversation, and no room in Smut's brain for small worries. All his attention had to be given to the game, and no chance missed if he was to win the match. His mother and her confession passed out of his mind completely. Enid's apparent defection ceased to trouble him. A man to play golf well must give to it all his attention. The eleventh hole, being the longest on the course, passed to Walter Butt, his long drive and good brassy play serving him in good stead. But the twelfth and thirteenth were won by Smut. At the seventeenth green they stood all square. Smut felt quite excited when he stood on the eighteenth tee. The honour was his, and he got in a long, straight

drive; but Butt, as usual, outdrove him. Honours, however, were easy. Smut got a fine iron shot and landed on the green. Butt took his machie and fozzled it. He made a good recovery and was near the pin with his third, but a long putt by Smut decided the game.

"Thanks very much," said Butt genially. "I don't mind being beaten when it is only by a putt."

"The best I expected was to halve the match," Smut replied.

"It's my short game that handicaps me," Butt remarked. "But here come Cyril and Bates. Ah, that's a good approach of Cyril's."

They waited on the edge of the green until the others had holed out, and then the four of them walked off to the club house together.

Bates was four down on the round, but flattered himself that he had made a very good fight. "You fellows who have nothing else to do ought to excel," he said with a laugh.

"If it were a matter of brains only, you wouldn't give us a look in," Cyril replied.

"Oh, don't croak," laughed Walter Butt. "Golf is as much a matter of brains as of muscle."

They took an hour and a half over their lunch and pipes, and then started out again for their four-some. Smut had quite recovered himself. The spectres of the night could find no place on the breezy links. Once or twice memory, touched by some association of ideas, flashed his mother's face before his eyes, but it was only for a moment.

The ideal life was one of enjoyment, and he was enjoying himself to the full, and he intended to enjoy himself to the end of the chapter. Golf was his

favourite game. There was nothing violent about it. Boating he disliked. Football he loathed. Even tennis required too much exertion; but golf could be as leisurely as one liked.

He and Bates were partners in the foursome and managed on the whole to give a good account of themselves. They were three down at the turn it was true, but succeeded in pulling up all square at the sixteenth. The last two holes, however, went to their opponents.

After a shower bath and a change of clothes they were ready for their tea, after which they repaired to the veranda for a smoke.

Smut, as he watched the blue wreaths of smoke curling up from the bowl of his pipe, felt strengthened in his resolve to keep all he had. How could he give up the pleasant life he was leading and all the hopes that brightened the future? His parents wanted him to be a gentleman. Well, they had their wish. If his mother could see him now, would she, he wondered, wish him to sacrifice it all? He verily believed that nature meant him to be a gentleman. He was never cut out for hard work. Study was always a bore, and unpleasant things he shrank from by instinct. No, he was in his right place, and in that place he meant to stay.

A day or two later, however, when he got a brief note from Taffy telling him of his accident, he felt very much troubled. The wrongness of their positions came home to him with a force he had not known before. It was cowardly to leave Taffy to struggle alone, to have the burden and anxiety of a sick woman who was not his mother, and to face all the hardships and risks of a third-rate farm.

That night he hardly slept at all. All the spectres were out again, filling the darkness with their cries and complaints. How could he riot on Taffy's money—live in idleness and luxury—while Taffy lay suffering and helpless and in need ?

He never felt so miserable before in his life. If acquiescing in a wrong bore such bitter fruit, had he not better make a clean breast of it at once—before his mother died, if needs be ? He began to wonder now that she had kept the secret so long. She must have been a strong woman or she would have sunk under the load. But with daylight, as before, came other reflections. If he were to play an heroic part he would have to make his position sure beforehand. If he could marry Enid, for instance, he would be able to do without Taffy's money. It might not be very heroic to live on his wife, but it would not be morally wrong.

Unfortunately, however, Enid was not in the mood to receive his advances. She was not unfriendly, and now and then she was distinctly gracious. But he got no nearer. He found it impossible to get her away alone, and if Walter Butt were near, he got by far the greater share of attention.

Smut grew jealous and morbid and introspective. He felt sometimes as though the Cuffs knew his secret. He was masquerading under false colours. Apart from the gold—which was not his—what was he worth ? He fancied that Enid and everybody else would despise him but for his three thousand a year.

So instead of banishing the spectres they seemed to increase in number. Every night, when the lights were out, they sallied forth to torment him. Was it to be always so, he wondered. Unless he could get

the better of his conscience the sooner he changed places with Taffy the happier he would be.

He was feeling quite low-spirited when the telegram came announcing his mother's death.

"Now," he said to himself, "I am free to tell." He felt for a moment as though a burden had been lifted from his mind. His moral nature seemed suddenly to triumph. He could at last do the right thing and face all the consequences.

It was in this exalted mood that he packed his portmanteau and took the first train to Devonshire.

CHAPTER XI

A FRESH RESOLVE

By the time Smut reached the end of his railway journey his mood had nearly evaporated. The sight of the lonely farm-house completed the process. It seemed comparatively easy in moments of excitement and tension to reach high moral resolves, but when the excitement was passed, life and the world wore a very different face. He was down again on the level plains of hard fact. He had to take things as they were, not as they might be.

He could admire magnanimity still—in others. He could applaud self-sacrifice—in the abstract. He believed there was nothing finer in the world than moral heroism; but he frankly admitted to himself that he was not of the stuff of which martyrs were made. Besides, martyrdom was of no use unless somebody was to be benefited or some great cause advanced. But, if he sacrificed himself, who would be the gainer? If Taffy came suddenly into a large sum of money, it would more likely prove a curse to him than a blessing. He had never thought of that phase of the question before. Really, by sacrificing himself, he might be doing Taffy the greatest disservice that one man could do another.

As he drove from the station to the farm-house he noticed that here and there harvest had already begun. In the hot fields men were sweating in the broiling sun. The click and burr of reaping machines

rose distinctly on the air. Everyone he met looked tired and dusty and not too well fed.

"No," he said reflectively, "I was never meant for poverty, nor for hard work either. If I were to change places with Taffy I should simply starve. I know nothing about farming, and what else am I fit for? I have an education of sorts, but I could not turn it to any practical account. Heavens! if I were turned adrift to-morrow, what would become of me? I have learnt nothing at Oxford that would help me to earn my bread. I couldn't teach. I haven't brains enough to be a journalist. I couldn't even take the post of secretary unless somebody employed me out of charity. In a few years—if I hold on—I may get called to the Bar; but even then, if I ever do anything, I shall have to put in a long spell at 'devilling' for nothing. No; however moral I may feel, I shall have to stick to the plunder for the present."

Taffy was busy talking to Sheila Leyland, and so did not hear the sound of wheels or notice Smut pass the parlour window. He had not seen Sheila for nearly a week, and the sight of her face was like a glimpse of Paradise. Ruth Longton had died the previous evening, but it was not until noon to-day that the news had reached the Hall. Sheila had come to express her sympathy as soon as she could get away.

Taffy had welcomed her with more feeling than he was in the habit of showing. He had scarcely slept in the night, and was feeling terribly depressed. The long confinement was getting upon his nerves. The swiftly-ripening harvest was causing him great anxiety, and now the death of his foster-mother—

though it had been long expected—came with a painful shock.

When Amelia pushed open the door and announced "Miss Leyland" his eyes filled unconsciously, and when she spoke to him her evident sympathy touched him to the quick.

"You are good to come," he said huskily. "You see, I am still helpless."

"But you are getting better?"

"Yes, I suppose so. The doctor says I am doing very well indeed; but I am terribly impatient to be up and about—particularly now——"

"Yes, yes, I understand," she said hastily. "Is there anything I can do, do you think?"

"I don't think so," he answered slowly. "It is awfully kind of you to ask. The nurse I have is a very capable woman, and she is giving all possible assistance to Aunt Jane and Amelia. Jenkins—my man—went late last night to see the undertaker, and——" Then he paused suddenly and turned and stared out of the window.

"It is a bit hard," he said at length, "that I shall not be able to go to the funeral. She has been a good mother to me. However, there is no help for it."

"I suppose Mr. Discombe will not come down again?" she questioned, after a pause.

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "Smut is a good fellow, and he may show his sympathy in that way. I hardly expect him, however. You see, we have no claim upon him, and it's scarcely a fortnight since he went away."

"But I think I have heard you say he was very fond of your mother?"

"There's not the least doubt about that. And mother was very fond of him. I have sometimes thought she cared more for him than for me. I think the fact that he was motherless and alone drew out her heart to him."

"Oh, then, perhaps he will come down. Do you know that, frequently as I have stayed at the Hall, and often for months on the stretch, I do not remember ever to have seen him?"

"I'm not surprised at that. You see, he went away to a public school early in his teens, and since then he's only been a visitor at Crowdale, so possibly you've not both been visitors at the same time."

"Most likely that is so." Then, after a pause, "If there is anything I can do——" But the sudden flash in his eyes arrested further speech. She had never seen him look at her in that way before, and she was startled, perplexed. She felt the colour mounting suddenly to her cheeks. What did that look mean?

Then the door, which was not latched, was pushed slowly open, and Smut entered. Sheila rose quickly to her feet and turned towards him. She knew who he was in a moment. "How like his mother," was the thought that flashed through her mind. Then she blushed. How foolish of her. Mrs. Longton was only his foster-mother.

She had no time to pursue the thought farther. Smut for the moment was speechless. The vision of Sheila nearly took his breath away. He had seen lovely women many times, but a face so hauntingly sweet he had never before looked upon.

Taffy broke the silence. "Oh, Smut," he said impulsively, "it is good of you to come. I can't tell

you how thankful I am——” Then, after a momentary pause, “Let me introduce to you Miss Leyland.”

Smut bowed and took eagerly her outstretched hand.

“Miss Leyland is niece to Sir John,” Taffy explained. “She has been awfully good to us in our trouble.”

“Oh, no; I have really done nothing at all,” Sheila protested.

“The mere fact of your coming all this distance and on such a hot afternoon, too, means a great deal,” Smut interposed gallantly. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Sheila bowed a little stiffly, and a moment later took her departure. Smut insisted on seeing her to the gate. He wouldn’t have missed such an opportunity for anything. Of all the lovely women he had ever seen, she was far and away the loveliest.

“I hope Sir John is well?” he said in his blandest manner, as he opened the gate for her.

“He is very well, thank you,” and her voice was sweet as running water.

“I don’t think I have seen him for two or three years,” he went on. “How time slips away ! ”

“You don’t spend much of your time at Crowdale ? ”

“Indeed, no. It’s a bit out of the world; don’t you think so? Fortunately, term does not begin till October, so I hope I shall be able to stay a little longer this time.”

“It will be a great pleasure to Mr. Longton, I am sure. He will feel terribly lonely.”

“Yes; no doubt. This accident is very rough on him; don’t you think so ? ”

"I do indeed."

"And he will miss mother, of course; she was a very good sort. I shall never be grateful enough for all she did for me."

This was a very diplomatic little speech, and went straight to Sheila's heart. It was nice of him to speak of Mrs. Longton as "mother." It showed good feeling. She liked him better than she thought she would at first.

"Is that your bicycle? No, no; stay here, please, I will get it for you with pleasure," and off he ran to the cart shed, and was back again in a few moments wheeling her machine.

He was quite at his ease. There was no feeling, as with poor Taffy, of social inferiority. He had been so much in company and seen so much of ladies that he knew exactly the correct thing to do.

Sheila felt the difference instinctively. Here in all outward requirements was the finished gentleman. The product of one of the great public schools and of the most famous university.

Education, association, environment told, no doubt, and told immensely. Such things could not give character or worth; but they gave polish—a certain outward distinction. It might be only skin deep, in many instances scarcely that, but the brand was there and easy to be recognised.

Sheila, however, saw farther than most people. She admired easy and pleasant manners, of course, but she did not lay any undue value upon them. She looked for something of greater worth, and was not satisfied until she found it. She had known men both in England and India who were perfect gentlemen outwardly, but whose souls were black as night.

Taffy might not be the equal of Smut in outward graces and refinements, but she felt that he had a greater soul. There was something about the young farmer—a rugged strength, an individuality—that won her respect, almost her reverence. Smut was, no doubt, a pleasant young fellow, but she was not sure that he had any real depth of character.

“Let me hold the machine while you mount?” he pleaded.

“Thank you, I can manage better without assistance,” she answered, with a smile. And the next moment he stood watching her as she free-wheeled down the uneven lane towards the high road.

“By Jove, she’s a clinker!” he muttered to himself. “To think I should have stumbled across her in a place like this.”

He stood for several moments after she had turned the corner and was out of sight, then he made his way slowly back into the house.

Meanwhile, Taffy was waiting for him with a curious sense of foreboding in his heart. He had seen his look of surprise—of admiration—when his eyes fell upon Sheila. Indeed, he had eyes for nothing and no one else; and now, after less than five minutes’ acquaintance, he was out at the gate talking to her as though he had known her for months.

Who could tell to what such an acquaintance might lead? Smut was her social equal. He was in possession of three thousand a year. He had all the advantages of a public school and university education. He had the pleasant, easy, indolent manners that most people liked. If he chose to make love to her—— Taffy felt himself grow hot and cold by

turns. He knew before what love was. Now he understood for the first time what jealousy meant. Yet what could he do or say? He had known from the first that Sheila was not for such as he; he had tried to crush his love because he saw its folly; he had tried to face calmly the possibility of her marrying someone else. Yet now, when that possibility seemed to take definite shape, he was horrified. It was a hundred times worse than ever he imagined it could be.

Smoot sauntered slowly in and seated himself by his bedside. "I'm awfully sorry for you, old man," he said in his pleasant, drawling voice. "The luck has been against you of late, that's certain."

"Things are a bit rough at present," Taffy answered unsteadily. "It's good of you to come down."

"Not a bit of it. How could I do less? She was, you know, the only mother I ever knew, and I should be a brute if I could ever forget all she did for me."

"She spoke of you to the very last," Taffy said quietly.

"Yes?" Smoot questioned, with a startled look in his eyes.

"I think she would have liked to have seen you again; but, of course, she did not expect you."

"She left no message, I suppose?" Smoot questioned anxiously.

"Oh, no. During the last few days she scarcely spoke to anyone."

"It was rough on you not to be able to see her," Smoot replied, breathing more freely, and then abruptly turned the conversation to other matters.

Nothing was said about Sheila for some time; then Smut said, insinuatingly: "You are fortunate in having so fair a visitor."

Taffy's face hardened in a moment. "You refer to Miss Leyland?" he questioned.

"Yes. I confess I was never so taken with anyone in my life."

"You looked it."

"Did I? Well, I don't wonder. Don't you think she's lovely?"

"I do."

"Great Scot! I wouldn't mind breaking my leg to-morrow if I could be sure she would visit me."

"What rubbish, Smut!"

"I'm not so sure of that. A fellow would do a good deal to win a smile from such lips."

Taffy frowned and was silent.

"By the by, old man," Smut resumed after a pause, "that isn't the girl who gave you the sixpence, is it?"

"Yes."

"I don't wonder you kept it. Good Lord, if she were to give me a sixpence I'd set it round with diamonds."

"You told me I ought to have flung it back into her face."

"I hadn't seen her then. I tell you, old man, I intend to cultivate her acquaintance. You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?" Taffy answered harshly. "Why should I mind? Besides, at present there are other matters to think of."

Smut flushed. "I beg your pardon, Taffy," he said humbly. "I hope you won't think I am heart-

less or flippant, but such a vision of loveliness one does not see every day."

Sheila's name was not again mentioned till after the funeral.

A crowd of people came to the farm to pay their last tribute of respect to the dead woman. As they stood around the flower-strewn coffin the vicar gave an address, in which he spoke of "the sainted woman who was sleeping the last sleep." He alluded to her patience and industry and Christian temper. "She was not a woman," he said, "who talked much about religion, but she lived it. I knew her for nearly twenty years, and I speak as I always found her. She and her late husband knew what it was to struggle and endure hardship. Harvests were not always good, and misfortune sometimes dogged their steps; but they held on their way bravely and patiently, and they have left behind them an example of spotless integrity and sincerity."

Smut almost held his breath while this eulogy was being pronounced. Aunt Jane watched him furtively out of the corner of her eye. The bands of his purpose were being steadily strengthened. How could he tell the truth after such praise had been given? How could he shock the neighbours and destroy their faith in human nature?

These people believed her a saint, and so, for the most part, she was. Save for that one sin, she had lived a life that was worthy of all praise. Why should the world know the cruel truth? Better let sleeping dogs lie.

Aunt Jane guessed the thoughts that were passing through his mind. "He can never tell on her," she

said to herself. "After the vicar's words, it would be a scandal. Besides, he ain't the sort to give up everything for nothing. Well, well, if I'm to share the secret I must have a finger in the other pie," and she chuckled softly to herself.

Taffy was carried out into the front garden on a sofa so that he might see the funeral procession move away. It was a lovely afternoon in early August. There was just breeze enough to billow gently the cornfields that were still uncut. The sky was unflecked by a single cloud. He felt strangely moved. Never before had he realised so vividly the littleness of human life. The hills remained, even the houses, but the generations of men passed like cloud shadows across the fields. Father and mother both gone. How silent and empty the house would be.

He had great difficulty in keeping back the tears. He had a feeling that the old life was at an end, that the passing of this woman meant more to him than he yet understood, that he was launching on the troubled waters of an unknown future, and so dark was the cloud that, like one of old, he feared to enter into it.

At the graveside a crowd of villagers gathered, and, among the rest, Peggy Merton and Sheila Leyland. Peggy had come to represent her father, the Longtons being tenants of Sir John. Sheila had come, ostensibly, to keep her cousin company, but she would have come in any case. Aunt Jane and Smut were the only mourners. Smut was really the centre of interest to the villagers. He looked immaculate in his well-fitting frock coat, his patent leather boots, his tightly-gloved hands. His silk hat

might just have come from the makers, so bright was its polish. In comparison, the farmers and villagers looked shabby and ill-kempt and commonplace.

Peggy was quite taken with his appearance, and decided that he was worth knowing. Sheila kept her eyes on the vicar and listened reverently to his words.

Smut thought but little of the woman whose body was committed to the quiet earth. He had caught sight of Sheila, and his imagination was instantly quickened into life. He saw no one else, took no further interest in the service. Her face stirred his heart as it had never been stirred before.

He thought, a few days previously, that he cared for Enid Cuff; but he had not seen this fair creature then. Enid was not to be mentioned in the same day.

"I must know her better," he said to himself; "she is worth losing one's soul for."

CHAPTER XII

PLEASURE AND PAIN

SMUT had trying hours of doubt and uncertainty and moments of self-loathing and contempt. Now and then he felt that life would not be worth living unless he told the truth and made all the restitution that was in his power; but when he came close up to the sacrifice involved by such a course he drew back discomfited. He had not the courage necessary to such a surrender.

Also each day, as it passed, made the right more difficult of performance. On the day his mother died he was free to speak. Until that event he was bound by his promise to her. But she was now in her grave, and he had not spoken. To speak now would be to proclaim to the world that he had yielded to temptation—that every day since she died he had lived a lie.

He was proud of his good name; proud of the respect in which he was held by his friends. And even now he was not bad at heart. He loathed lying and dishonesty and uncleanness, and yet by the very necessity of a cruel destiny he was forced into a position that made his life a daily fraud and falsehood. He wondered if there was another man in the world who had to face such a desperate combination of circumstances—circumstances not of his own creation or choosing. He had always wanted to live an upright life. He could honestly affirm that to himself, and yet here he was, posing as an honourable man,

and all the while cheating another out of his inheritance.

So day after day he was torn by conflicting emotions—his better nature waging war with his lower, his conscience urging him to do the right and take all risks, his cowardice and selfishness protesting that it was too late—that the wrong of more than twenty years ago could not be righted to-day.

Whenever he honestly faced the question of what doing the right meant he drew back. He declared it would need the courage and self-abnegation of an Apostle Paul to make such a surrender, and he was not a saint or a martyr, and therefore the thing was impossible.

He knew that morally he was losing ground. He began to lose faith in himself, in his own honour and integrity. He was not a strong man; he was a weak man. He felt it through every fibre of his being, and the humiliation of such a consciousness was sometimes very hard to bear.

Of course he made excuses; they were always at his elbow. He was only doing what the majority of men would do under the same circumstances. There was, after all, a limit to human nature, and he never sought grace from a higher Power.

He was unusually kind and attentive to Taffy. On the night of the funeral, when they sat alone in the silent house, he offered to remain at Crowdale as long as he could be of any service. He was quite sincere in this, but not altogether unselfish. To befriend Taffy would be some measure of atonement; it would also help to ease his conscience, which sadly needed a narcotic. But he had another object in view. He wanted to see more of Sheila Leyland.

She had touched his imagination as it had never been touched before. Her face haunted him. For the moment, at any rate, he had absolutely lost his heart.

"You will find it very dull here," Taffy said slowly with an absent look in his eyes. "I think we shall be able to manage all right."

"I believe it would do me good to breathe for a few weeks my native air," Smut asserted; "but that is not everything. You are my foster-brother—and—and—I hardly know how to put it; but if you would let me stay for a few weeks as a paying guest, why I should look upon it as a favour."

"My dear Smut," Taffy said impulsively, "you are welcome to stay as long as you like, and I shall be delighted to have your company, but there must be no talk of payment."

"If that is your decision I am afraid I must leave," Smut said regretfully. "I am not going to be a burden and an expense to you if I know it. I am sorry you don't want me."

"But I do want you," Taffy asseverated with a quick flash in his eyes.

"Then why not let me contribute to the extra expense? If I go from here I shall have to pay for my keep."

"I thought you were staying with friends."

"I have been; but I am not going back again to Ravenscourt. My idea was to go up to town and get rooms in or near the Temple. But I would much prefer staying here for a little while, only you will not let me."

"You must not put it that way, Smut, please; I am not so poor that I need to take in lodgers."

"How proud you are, Taffy," Smut said with a laugh. "I am not proposing that you take in lodgers. But knowing the expense you have been put to of late, don't you realise how uncomfortable I should feel——"

"I wonder who is proud now?" Taffy interrupted.

"Well, let us assume that we are both proud, and so we compromise the matter in the way I have suggested. Hang it all, man, we are brothers, and while I am here let us run the domestic show between us."

"I hate the thought of your paying while you are here," Taffy protested.

"Well, you pay while you are here, at any rate. Why shouldn't I? It is only the old arrangement over again."

Taffy yielded at length, but not very willingly. He was not at all sure that he wanted Smut for any length of time. On the other hand he could not let him run away with the impression that he was unwelcome. A week before he would have hailed with delight the prospect of Smut spending a few weeks at the farm. His presence broke up the monotony and brought a feeling of the outside world. But if he were going to make love to Sheila—that changed the complexion of things, and he would be much better pleased if he went away at once and did not return again.

It was a dog-in-the-manger spirit, he admitted, but he could not help himself. His love had deepened and strengthened with every passing day. Her sympathy had been so sweet, her kindness so unobtrusive that it would need a much less sensitive nature than his to remain unmoved.

He had always intended to be master of himself. But this love for Sheila had overwhelmed him like a flood. He was left with no choice in the matter. He simply loved her with all the strength of his nature, and there was an end of it. He could much easier cease to breathe than cease to love her.

Hence to sit quietly by and see his foster-brother woo and win her was almost more than human nature could bear. The idea of any man taking this fair creature to his heart was as the bitterness of death to him. But for Smut to do this—Smut, who had already all the good things of life—Smut, who came out top in everything——

He wanted to love Smut still. They had always been good friends, and he had tried from his childhood not to envy him his good fortune. But if he won Sheila Leyland he feared he would hate him. It was too bad to try to rob him of the one bright vision he possessed—to blot out the one gleam of sunshine from his grey and colourless life. Were the rich to have everything? Was money the open sesame to every Aladdin's cave?

He slept that night much less than usual. The habit of sleep was gradually leaving him. Worry and trouble and lack of exercise were affecting his general health far more than the injured limb. And now this fresh demon—the demon of jealousy, had come to torment him. Really he began to wonder whether life itself was something to be grateful for.

Smut did his best to make himself useful. He went out early every morning and saw that the men got to their work in good time, and in the evening he reported to Taffy what had been done. He also

made frequent excursions to Milor and loitered much longer than was necessary in the field-paths that led past the Hall.

On the third day he was rewarded. He came face to face with Peggy and Sir John just outside the park gates. Peggy stopped and smiled a recognition. She had decided before that a young man who had three thousand a year in his own right might be worth cultivating.

Smut raised his hat at once and went to meet her. Sir John looked on and grunted. He knew Smut well enough, though he had not seen him for a good many years; but he was a little bit puzzled that Peggy should so suddenly unbend.

"You know Mr. Discombe, father?" Peggy said in her most gracious manner, and she looked up into his face and smiled.

"I ought to, of course," Sir John said in a big, cheery voice, "though I reckon it is years since I saw him last," and he extended a rather beefy hand which Smut shook warmly.

"You are at Oxford, I hear," Sir John went on in the same breezy manner. "Dear me, it only seems like yesterday since I was there myself. And a rollicking time I had, too. I stroked our college boat one year in torpids, and we made four bumps. You should have been at the 'bump' supper we had that night. Oh, well! I suppose you haven't altered much since my time."

"I don't think Oxford alters very much," Smut replied modestly.

"The same larks, I'll be bound; the same raids into each other's rooms, eh; the same rows with the dons?"

"Now and then we get into a scrape," Smut admitted.

"I'll be bound you do," and Sir John chuckled. "Young blood will leap occasionally. I remember some exploits that would make you laugh. But come along to the Hall and let me hear what Oxford is like nowadays."

Smut turned without hesitation, and the three passed through the lodge gates and up the shaded, winding drive.

Smut felt himself in luck's way. To get an invitation to the Hall was the thing of all things that he desired. If he made himself agreeable Sir John would very likely invite him again. For Sir John himself he did not care twopence, nor for Peggy either; but to be able to study Sheila Leyland at close quarters; to see her in mufti, if the expression might be allowed; to converse with her freely and without restraint—these were the very things he had been desiring for days past.

Sir John was in his most genial humour. He could hardly be otherwise. He had not had a twinge of gout for nearly a month. He was on good terms with all his tenants, though how long that condition of things might last he did not know. He had no domestic or financial worries, and to crown all, the weather was as glorious as any pessimistic farmer could desire.

He and Smut talked Oxford all the way to the Hall, Peggy thinking all the while how much better times men had in the world than women. Smut spoke with great modesty, though he managed to give Sir John the impression that he took his full share in the many-sided life of his college.



" Sheila came out on the terrace to greet them "

(see page 137).

As they neared the house Sheila came out on the terrace to greet them. Smut held his breath for a moment. Dressed all in white and with the sunlight filtering through her rich brown hair, she looked lovelier than ever.

Sir John was telling a story of some celebration they had when he was at Oxford, when they used the college furniture to make a bonfire, and smashed everything they could lay hands upon that was at all breakable.

But Smut scarcely heeded what he was saying. Sheila for the moment dominated everything. Her presence marked the bounds of space and threw into eclipse the beauty of earth and sky.

He had scarcely thought of Enid Cuff since his first meeting with Sheila on the day of his arrival. He was no longer jealous of the Hon. Walter Butt, no longer anxious to have a share of Sir Jonathan's fabled millions. If he could only win this beautiful creature, life and the world would have nothing more to offer—would leave him nothing more to desire. He honestly believed that he was in love with her. Her beauty intoxicated him; her grace and sweetness charmed every sense and sent his blood galloping like fury through his veins.

Sheila came slowly forward to greet him.

"This is Mr. Discombe," Sir John said heartily. "You have heard of him, I think. Peggy and I pressed him to come along and have tea with us."

Smut was about to explain that he had met Miss Leyland before, but pulled himself up abruptly. She might not care to have it known that they had met in Taffy's room.

She shook hands with him in quite friendly

fashion and then intimated that they were having tea on the lawn.

In a few minutes they found themselves seated in the grateful shadow of a huge yew tree. The soft warm breeze dreamed lazily through the dark green foliage, the bees droned among the flowers, Sir John threw his hat on the grass and wiped his bald head.

"It really is too hot to do much walking," he said; "but Peggy insisted on dragging me into the village. What slaves we are, Discombe, especially when women get the better of us."

"A little exercise does you good, father," Peggy protested. "You don't get enough of it."

"Don't I? A lot you know about it," and he laughed boisterously.

"I expect Mr. Discombe is tired," Peggy went on. "He must have had quite a long walk."

"It is the only exercise I get these times," Smut laughed. "And really I am getting to enjoy it."

"Find it rather slow, I expect," Sir John remarked. "Will you be staying long?"

"A week or two, I expect. You see term does not begin till October, and I want to help Robin all I can."

"Help, eh?" and Sir John chuckled good-humouredly.

"Oh, I believe I am of some use, Sir John," Smut protested. "You see I can give an eye to things. I was up at six this morning and saw the reaper started in the six-acre."

"Excellent! Quite a moral training," and Sir John chuckled again.

"I don't know how long my virtue will hold out," Smut continued. "But since poor Robin is *hors de*

combat, I feel it on my conscience to do the best I can."

Sheila looked up with an approving glance. Peggy threw her gloves into an empty chair and began pouring out tea.

Smut felt quite at home and showed great tact in waiting on the ladies. He was never aggressive, but neither was he awkward nor shy. He knew the right thing to do and say. Tea, with what the village folk would call "the quality," was no new thing in his experience.

After tea Peggy and Sheila showed him round the grounds. He paid the former the greater amount of attention, but his eyes were mainly on the latter. Nothing escaped his notice—the colour of her eyes, the poise of her shapely head, the richness of her complexion, the perfection of her teeth, the curve of her lips, the wealth of her billowy hair.

Peggy was called into the house at length, and he and Sheila sauntered away together. He felt like one intoxicated. Her presence thrilled him through every fibre.

"Your friend is still improving, I hope," she questioned a little shyly.

"You mean my brother? Oh, yes, he is doing very well indeed. He is going to try his crutches in a few days."

"It is nice of you to speak of him as your brother."

Smut winced involuntarily, and a cold wave crept down his back; but he answered almost hurriedly: "Oh, as to that, you see we grew up together from childhood in the same house and with the same woman to mother us."

"You never knew your own mother?"

"No, I never knew her." He winced almost visibly as the lie passed his lips, but it was out. There was no help for it, he told himself. He would have to lie and go on lying to the end.

"And your father? Do you remember him?" He felt her eyes upon him, felt the hot blood rising slowly to his neck and face. Surely she had no suspicion.

"I don't think I remember him," he said slowly. "Sometimes I have a fancy, but I am not sure. You see, he went away when I was but a tiny child."

"And he never returned?"

"Alas, no!" He almost gasped as he uttered the words. What if he had returned? Would he not have discovered the fraud? Surely he would!

"You must often wish that you had known your parents. It must seem a terrible loss."

"It is a terrible loss," he blurted out hurriedly, feeling himself one of the most despicable hypocrites that ever breathed. To himself he said: "I wish to Heaven she would change the subject. I can't stand this much longer, or she will read the secret in my face."

"It was fortunate for you that you were brought up in such a good home and by such good people," she went on meditatively.

"Very fortunate," he assented. "Yes; nobody could have been kinder. I owe them a great debt of gratitude."

"Everybody speaks of them as being very worthy and honourable people."

"They were honest as the day," he blurted out. "Oh, yes. You should have heard what the vicar said at the funeral." He felt himself sinking deeper

and deeper. How many lies had he told that afternoon, he wondered. But it didn't matter; his life henceforth would be one colossal lie and hypocrisy.

They made the circuit of the grounds at length, and came up again in front of the Hall. Sir John was still in the depths of a large wicker chair, but he rose at the sound of their voices and came forward.

"You must come across some evening and have a game of billiards," he said. "You play billiards, of course?"

"A little," Smut answered, "but I'm afraid I am not good at games."

"Be able to beat me, I bet. I scarcely ever touch a cue now—nobody to play with. That's the worst of growing old. Children take themselves off and make homes of their own."

"I shall be delighted to come across some evening," Smut answered.

"That's right. And you can tell me more about Oxford. Things have changed since my day, no doubt. But I like to meet a 'Varsity man, even though he belongs to a later generation—like to hear about the old place and what the young bloods are doing to-day."

Smut journeyed homeward through the summer twilight thrilling with a pleasure the like of which he had never known before, and yet a pleasure shot through and through with the most poignant pain. "Oh, why did she ever tell me?" was the burden of his thoughts. "She might have kept silence to the end. But I shall get over it in time, no doubt. Yes, I shall get over it." But he reddened unconsciously

at the reflection. He knew what "getting over it" implied—the deadening of his moral nature, the shrivelling of his conscience, the decay of his manhood. He would never be able to offer his best to Sheila Leyland. It was only the heart of a coward that he could lay at her feet—aye, and worse than a coward. He wondered how much deeper he would sink before the end—wondered for a moment if he would have courage enough to make love to her.

But that fear quickly passed. "By hook or by crook I will win her," he said to himself with an energy he did not often display. "She is worth lying for to the end of the chapter, and after all 'All's fair in love and war.'"

He was hot and excited when at length he burst into Taffy's room.

"You'll never guess where I've been," he said, getting in the first words.

Taffy lifted a pair of inquiring eyes, but did not speak.

"I've had tea at the Hall," he said with a laugh. "Tea with the squire and the girls."

Taffy felt his heart stop for a moment, then he said without trace of emotion, "Indeed !"

"Miss Leyland took me all round the grounds after tea. Isn't she ripping ?"

"Is she ?"

"And Sir John has invited me across to play billiards with him some evening soon. Don't you think I'm in luck's way ? It's just the thing I wanted."

"You've generally been in luck's way," Taffy said quietly, and then relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER XIII

GETTING ON

AFTER Smut had paid two or three visits to the Hall Aunt Jane began to have visions. She had been greatly exercised in her mind at first as to what had induced Smut to prolong his stay at the farm. In her slow way she argued that if he intended to cheat Taffy out of his inheritance he would want to get away from him as soon as possible. It seemed unreasonable to think that he would live in the same house with him, and partake of his hospitality, and all the while be cheating him out of his rightful possessions. This thought gave her a good deal of anxiety. If Smut should "turn religious," and do the correct and honourable thing, where would she come in?

Since the night she listened to her sister's confession she had built a good many castles and indulged in some remarkable flights of fancy. Never, since she had been a girl in her teens, and had dreamed of a handsome knight on a white charger who fell in love with her at first sight and carried her off to his stately castle and married her, never since these early and romantic days had her imagination taken such wild flights as during the last few weeks.

Smut was in possession of three thousand a year, which to her seemed almost fabulous wealth. If she could induce him to part with three hundred of it as

the price of keeping his secret, she would be able to indulge in luxuries that almost dazzled her imagination. Three hundred pounds a year! It would practically mean a golden sovereign for every day of the week barring Sundays. Six sovereigns a week, winter and summer alike! At present she could not see how she would ever be able to spend so much. She and her husband had lived upon less than fifteen shillings a week ever since they were married, and they had brought up two children, one of whom was dead, and the other in America. And now, when they had only themselves to keep, to have all this wealth——

Her mind played round it as moths play round a lamp. She rolled the thought over and over and over, and, like a snowball, it seemed to get bigger at every turn. Of course, she would have to deal out the coin very sparingly to Ned, or he would get drunk every day. Also, she would have to keep from him the secret of her income, or he would fly at Smut himself, and perhaps, metaphorically, kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

She saw herself a woman of great importance in Wiston, and better dressed than any of her thirteen neighbours. She pictured invitations to farm-houses on equal terms. She would cut a much bigger dash than her sister Ruth had done. Ruth had never risen to her true position, had never made the most of her opportunity.

When Smut announced his intention of remaining awhile at the farm she became alarmed. Surely he could not mean to give up everything to Taffy? She heard him promise his mother that he would say nothing about the matter while she was alive; but

now that she was in her grave he was free to speak if he liked. Would he speak? Would he be such a fool?

For several days she watched him closely, listened at keyholes when she had the opportunity, tracked him down when he went for rambles alone.

When a week had passed she began to breathe more freely. Evidently he had not told Taffy, and evidently, also, the magnet that held him was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Milor. She began to put two and two together. She instituted inquiries. Nearly everything that transpired at the Hall was known in the village. The visits of Smut were freely commented on, and some amount of surprise was expressed that Sir John should be on such friendly terms with a young man whose early life was spent at Crowdale Farm. Of course, he had a lot of money, and that, they supposed, made all the difference. Money was a great leveller. It did not seem to matter who or what a man was so long as he was rich, and Sir John worshipped gold like the rest of them.

The under-gardeners lived in Milor, so did the stable-boys. Several of the maidservants also were from the village, hence there was a constant passing to and fro. Smut had been encountered more than once in the field path that skirted the park. When he had been at the Hall he had been unable to keep his eyes off Miss Leyland. Once he had come to the Hall on the merest excuse; he had forgotten something the previous evening.

All these things were commented on by the servants and carried, with embellishments, to the village. Other people beside Aunt Jane put two and two together. Gossip settled the matter within a

fortnight that Smut was in love with the squire's niece.

As far as Milor was concerned, nobody had anything against it. Smut was a very respectable young man, and he was rich. What more could be required ? Sheila Leyland was undoubtedly a very beautiful and attractive young woman, but when you had said that you had said everything—at least, that was the general opinion. Her father had held an important post in India, and had now retired on his pension, which was enough to keep him respectably, but left no margin for extravagance.

Sheila was the only child by his first wife—a sister of Sir John Merton ; the second wife's money, if she had any, would go to her own children.

Hence Sheila's only chance in life, so the gossips said, was in marrying a rich husband. There ought to be no difficulty in that, of course. Anyone so beautiful and well connected as she, ought to have plenty of choice. Still, they were of opinion that even a girl with Sheila's good looks ought to think twice before she rejected three thousand a year.

Aunt Jane's depression vanished quite suddenly and her visions became more wonderful and alluring than ever. Smut was in love ; therefore he would be more anxious than ever that his secret should be kept. The more anxious he was, the more he would be willing to pay. The more deeply he was in love, the more generous he would be. Everything was working out to her advantage. If she had had the planning of the whole affair herself, she could not have done it better.

Aunt Jane wrote to her husband that it was absolutely necessary that she should remain at Crow-

dale Farm a few weeks longer. Ned's reply was on a postcard and was quite characteristic :

"Orl right. I'm quite appy.—NED."

It was not exactly the kind of reply that Aunt Jane expected. She had been absent from home a good many weeks now, and she was secretly hoping that her spouse missed her very much. Hence to be told—and on a postcard, too, that anybody might read!—that he was quite happy, was somewhat disconcerting. But for the prospects of three hundred a year—perhaps more—she would have had visions of a different kind. As it was, her thoughts went straying back to Wiston more frequently than was pleasant.

"I wonder what Ned's up to?" she kept saying to herself. It did not seem natural that a husband should be parted so long from his wife, and yet manifest no desire for her to return. Had it not been such an awkward cross-country journey, she would have paid him an unexpected visit.

"Happy, indeed," she reflected. "He's no right to be happy when I'm away. If he's up to any of his pranks, I'll make him suffer when I come into my fortune."

Judging by appearances, Smut was making good headway. His visits to Milor Hall became more and more frequent. Every other evening or so he went across to play billiards with Sir John, and often when he returned all the household was in bed.

Aunt Jane bided her time. To fire the mine too soon would be a mistake. When the engagement was formally announced would be her time. He

would have so much more at stake then. There would be a double reason why the secret should be kept.

Taffy grew more and more depressed. All that made life beautiful seemed to be slipping from him. Sheila never came to Crowdale now—rarely, even, sent an inquiry. All her interest in him appeared to have evaporated. She had apparently found a new interest. His worst fears had come true. He tried his best to school himself to patience and resignation, but it was a difficult task. He had loved her—loved her still—with such an absorbing passion that the thought of Smut possessing her was like poison in his blood.

He could not have told anyone what he felt, for there were no words in his vocabulary that would express it. He was jealous, he knew; but jealousy was only a part, and a very small part—there was something infinitely more terrible to bear than jealousy.

To a man who is in love, in the real and true sense, the object of his affection is a sacred thing—not merely a creature of the opposite sex, a woman amongst a million other women—but *the* woman. Alone, separate, sacred, scarcely to be gazed upon by other eyes, sanctified to him. For other lips to be pressed to hers would be sacrilege, and anything else, infamy.

Taffy tried his best to accustom himself to the idea, and the harder he tried the more utterly he failed. In spite of himself, a vague, far-away hope had lived in his heart. He had pictured himself winning his way to a position that would be worthy of his love; had dreamed of a possible condescension, of a sacrifice so sweet and rare that heaven would

be mirrored in a cottage, of a triumph of the affections over all minor considerations. And now his hope was going swiftly out in darkness, the dream was ending in hard and bitter reality.

Smut made no secret of his purpose, and daily paraded his triumph. He was "getting on." He laughed joyously when talking to Taffy, not seeing the pain he was causing. He told of the walks and talks he had with Sheila under the broad trees of the park, of the opportunities Peggy and the squire threw in his way, of the hints that had been thrown out that he would be quite an acceptable suitor.

"It is my money, of course," he said one day to Taffy, with a sudden flush, and then with a feeling as though someone had thrown cold water down his back.

"Not very complimentary that to yourself," Taffy replied, with a touch of acid in his tone.

"I am referring to Sir John and Miss Merton more particularly."

"But what of Miss Leyland? Is she also of those who worship the golden calf?"

"I don't suggest that for a moment," Smut said, reddening, "not for a moment. Miss Leyland is an angel. But what I meant was—money gives you position, position gives you the *entrée*, shall I say? then follows opportunity."

"No doubt you are right."

"Besides, girls have to think of the future, like other people," Smut went on. "They are no more in love with poverty than the rest of us——"

"But if they love the man?" Taffy interrupted.

"My dear fellow," Smut answered, with a superior air of wisdom, "a girl doesn't allow herself to

love—I mean sensible girls don't—until the coast is clear, if I may put it in that way. If they know the man is too poor to give them what they want, they switch themselves off the track very quickly."

"You don't seem to have a very high opinion of girls as a class," Taffy said, after a pause.

"Oh, but I have. There you mistake me entirely. And, I don't mind telling you, I'm enormously susceptible. A beautiful woman fascinates me."

Taffy curled his lip slightly and was silent.

"But, of course, there's one woman above all others for every man," Smut went on. "I believe that entirely; and I don't mind telling you, Taffy, the woman for me is Sheila Leyland."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Oh, I don't mind admitting that I have been attracted before—smitten, you may say. All men pass through the same experience, I suppose. But this is different. When the genuine thing comes to you, you know it."

"And you have told her this?"

"Not yet. But I think she is beginning to guess. Oh, I tell you I am getting on," and he laughed again.

Smut was fortunate in one thing. He could not be possessed by two ideas or two emotions at the same time, and just lately Sheila had taken complete possession of him. He had lived entirely in the present and in the future. He had shut the lid down on the past with a bang, and done his best to padlock it. He had gone too far now to turn back. He was in the hands of a fate that he could not resist. Hence, his only course was to turn his back reso-

lutely upon the past and go ahead along the path that destiny had marked out for him.

It was only at odd moments now that his better nature asserted itself. Such a moment swept past him like a blast from the north when he spoke to Taffy of "his money." *His* money. The shame of it seemed to freeze his blood for a moment, but he quickly recovered himself.

It was good discipline to live with the man he had robbed—that he was still robbing. It would be difficult to catch him unawares now. He was facing the worst at the start. If the shame was bearable at Crowdale, he would forget it altogether in Oxford and London.

The days slipped away rapidly. Taffy got out of doors, and made considerable excursions into the fields on two crutches and with his leg in a sling. It was a delight to him to be out of doors again. He was getting morbid and introspective and pessimistic. Lying alone in the house, the world seemed a desert, and life a fraud, and every hope a cheat, and every ambition a snare.

But when he began to "potter about" out of doors, his mind as well as his body recovered tone. The fresh air blowing from the down, the pungent odour of the fields and hedgerows, the song of the larks high in the blue, the ring and click of reapers borne faintly from distant fields, the laughter of children floating up from the lane—all had their influence upon him.

Now and then his eyes would wander across the wide stretch of fields to the great bank of trees that marked the vicinity of Milor Hall. He would picture Smut, as a familiar and equal, strolling about the

pleasant grounds as though to the manner born. He would picture Sheila—sweet, graceful, shy—walking by his side, listening to his talk, wondering, perhaps already, if this man were her destiny.

Then he would grind his teeth and hobble away. It was no use trying to resist the inevitable. He would have to endure, as other men had done before him; but it was hard all the same. His love for Sheila was such an all-absorbing passion.

One afternoon in late August, as he rested against a stile and dreamed, he became conscious of a presence near him. He had heard no voice or foot-step, felt no movement in the air, but he turned his head with the full assurance that someone was close at hand. An odour of violets touched his nostrils, and there was a sudden quickening of his heart.

His eyes lighted up instantly and his lips broke into a smile. Sheila came forward with extended hand and the glow of the sunshine on her pure, oval face.

"I am so glad to see you again," she said in her unaffected way. "I should have called long ago—I should indeed—only I had no excuse——" and the colour mounted suddenly to her face. "You see," she went on, "we have heard of your progress every few days from Mr. Discombe."

"He has been a frequent visitor, I understand?" The smile went from his face as quickly as it came and his eyes became hard and cold.

"Yes; quite a frequent visitor," she answered, with slight hesitation and a deepening colour on her cheeks. "Uncle enjoys his company very much."

"Smut is not usually fond of elderly men," Taffy replied, with subtle emphasis.

"No? I expect it is the billiards he likes. They play a great deal."

"Usually he does not care for games either."

"Oh, I think you are mistaken. He often wants me to play tennis with him."

"And do you play much?"

"Sometimes—when the weather is not too hot."

For several moments he did not reply. He toyed with his watch-chain and with his lucky sixpence. He was not conscious of doing so. His thoughts were on very different matters.

Sheila looked at him a little less frankly than was her wont. She was conscious of some impalpable restraint, some intangible shadow that had fallen between them.

She noticed that he still wore her sixpence, and that his fingers toyed with it unconsciously; and, in spite of herself, her heart quickened its beat.

He fixed his eyes on her at length with a steady, penetrating gaze as though he would read her very soul. She flushed unconsciously, but did not flinch.

"Smut is very frank with me," he said a little unsteadily. "May I congratulate him when next I see him?"

He felt almost before the words were out of his mouth that he had asked a rude—perhaps an unpardonable—question. After all, it was no business of his.

He saw the colour mount to her cheeks until her face was crimson.

"I am not going to pretend that I do not know what you mean," she said quietly, and the colour vanished from her face as suddenly as it came, leav-

ing her deathly pale by contrast; "but you may *not* congratulate him."

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly. "I ought not to have asked such a question. It was very impertinent of me."

"No, you need not say that," she replied, in the same quiet tones. "But, now that the subject has been broached, I want you to tell me all you can about—about—your foster-brother."

Taffy stared at her and almost gasped. She had unwittingly placed him in the tightest corner he had ever known.

CHAPTER XIV

FACTS AND IDEALS

It was not difficult, so Taffy thought, to understand the why and wherefore of Sheila's request. Smut had no doubt made his intentions quite clear. Sir John in all probability approved—perhaps had urged—Smut's claim. Miss Peggy would be at one with her father.

But Sheila herself was undecided; perhaps she had been taken by surprise. Evidently she liked him. He was gentlemanly, not bad looking, and comfortably off. In short, he was eligible. In some quarters he would be considered a good catch.

But she was in doubt. She knew comparatively little about him. She was a high-minded girl herself, and would never be happy with a man whose standards were lower than her own. If she could be assured on this point she would accept him.

Taffy felt like a criminal who had been asked to construct his own scaffold. He was to give Smut a character that she might marry him—she the woman whom he loved and for whom he would readily give his life.

It was a fiendishly cruel position in which to be placed. He did not want her to marry Smut. Smut was not good enough for her. There was no man living who was good enough for her. By the rights of all that was sacred in human love she belonged to him, and for another man to marry her would be torture beyond endurance.

And yet here he was asked to do the very thing he dreaded—compelled by the force of circumstances to say the word that would seal his own doom. If he refused to speak his silence would be misinterpreted, it would be taken for granted that there were facts or episodes that could not be mentioned. If he enlarged on Smut's failings that also would be misinterpreted, and in the long run would probably do Smut less harm than it would do himself. If he praised him—as he was forced to do—then all the beautiful fabric of his dreams would turn to dust.

His face betrayed nothing of his inward distress. If he hesitated, Sheila did not appear to notice it. She was quite calm and collected, and in her clear brown eyes there was no look of worry or anxiety. He rather wondered at that. A young girl on the point of coming to the most momentous decision of her life ought, he thought, to betray some trace of emotion.

He wanted to ask the reason of her inquiry, but refrained from doing so. He had asked one impertinent question already, and was afraid to jeopardise their friendship by asking another.

"There is very little to tell," he said without looking at her. "Smut is a thoroughly good fellow. He is not like the curate's egg, good in parts; he is good all through. What more can I say than that?"

"But he is not perfect, surely?" she questioned with a smile. She did not blush as she asked the question, or betray the least nervousness or hesitancy.

"Perfect? Well, I suppose nobody is perfect, though human nature is as God made it, and I don't like decrying His handiwork."

She glanced at him suddenly, and an eager, ques-

tioning light came into her eyes. His answer seemed to open up broad vistas of thought and speculation, but this was not the time to explore them.

"You have known Mr. Discombe all his life?" she ventured after a pause.

"We grew up together from childhood," he said, "From the age of about two until we were twelve, or thirteen we were inseparable."

"And you admire him?"

"Very much."

"He has his failings, of course?"

"Most men have, but he seems to have fewer than most."

"Perhaps he has never been tried?"

"Most men are tried in some form or other, and I hardly think it likely that he has escaped."

Another pause followed, during which she kept her eyes steadily on his face.

"You will think me very inquisitive," she said with a light laugh; "but then, you know, all women are inquisitive."

"Is that so?" he said, and a slow smile stole over his face. "You see, my experience is very limited."

"I'm telling you the truth, anyhow," she laughed. "Sooner or later you will find it out for yourself."

"If I find out nothing worse," he ventured, "I will not complain."

She glanced up at him, and their eyes met. For a moment or two he seemed to hold her as with a magnet. She felt the hot blood slowly creeping up into her neck and cheeks. There were unfathomable depths in his eyes—meanings, passions, mysteries unutterable. She felt his strength, his greatness, his mastery. He could, if he would, dominate her will

as he controlled his own. Then, with a sudden movement, she withdrew her eyes and looked out toward the down behind which the sun was beginning to dip.

She felt as though his gaze had exhausted her. Her heart was beating painfully fast, her brain was perplexed by innumerable questions.

"You look tired," he said gently and sympathetically. "Won't you sit on the stile?"

"I think I must be getting back," she answered apologetically. "I have been out quite a long time."

"And someone may be waiting for you?" he suggested a little maliciously.

"That is more than probable," she answered quite frankly, and she walked up to the stile and sat down.

Taffy felt more and more puzzled. What curious, inscrutable creatures women were. How they seemed to contradict themselves at all points. Why in the name of Heaven if she were in love with Smut did she not hurry back? He knew that Smut was at the Hall, so apparently did she. What was at the back of her mind? Was it woman's way to tantalise a man by keeping him waiting for her answer?

And yet he was glad to steal this blessed moment from Smut, and bask, probably for the last time, in the light of her eyes. He had spoken well of his foster-brother, and yet he felt more and more that he was not worthy of her—though for that matter he did not know any man who was. She looked, as she sat on the rough projecting plank, the embodiment of every grace and charm. It was not only that her face was perfect; his eyes wandered slowly to her feet, peeping from beneath her white muslin dress. How perfectly and daintily shod she was. Then he noticed

her hands, which lay ungloved in her lap—shapely, capable hands, nails pink tinted and carefully manicured, wrists small and flexible, arms bare to the elbows, white, smooth and beautifully rounded.

How well she carried herself. Sitting not too erect, square shouldered, full chested, well knit, flexible; every line and curve perfection—hair tumbled beneath her picture hat, a tiny curl almost hid one of her ears; eyebrows straight and delicately pencilled; skin like ivory, with the colour showing through; mouth fairly wide, lips curved like Cupid's bow; chin like the Venus of Milo.

It was a picture of which he would never tire, and best of all it indexed the woman's self. During the last two years he had seen a good deal of her from time to time, mainly from a distance no doubt. He had heard the villagers speak of her again and again. He had watched the unfolding of her character with absorbing interest. He was prejudiced, perhaps. She caught his fancy from the first. He was in love with her almost before he knew, and all that had happened since had deepened and intensified his passion.

He sat a little distance away on a log of wood, aching to get near her. No one knew the struggle he had. He wanted to risk all and tell her everything, pour out in burning words the story of his love, take her in his arms and press his lips to hers, hold her tightly to his heart in spite of her struggles, master her, subdue her by sheer force of will and the might of his passion.

What folly it was. She sat there, no doubt, thinking of Smut. He had given him a good character, and she would go home and say yes to him. He

saw the thing settled as far as it could be settled. What a bitter, inexplicable, disappointing thing life was.

"It must be nice for you to be able to look after your farm again." She spoke without looking at him.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "But it is of little use. I shall have to give it up."

"Give it up?"

"I can't look after the house and the farm too. Aunt Jane will be going back in a week or so, and then I shall be stranded. Mother made the farm pay."

"But—but—you will be able to get a housekeeper."

"No housekeeper can take mother's place. A housekeeper is only a servant, after all, with no real interest in the concern. Mother looked after the poultry, the eggs, the butter. She threw as much energy and foresight into her department as father and I did into ours. She watched the expenditure, economised at every point. Since she took to her bed——" And he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"And you have really decided to give it up?" she said slowly without looking at him. "Does it not seem a pity?"

"Well, you see, I am driven to it," he said, and a slow, pathetic smile spread itself over his face. "Not that it really matters much. I am not rooted in the place. I have no ties now, and to a man who is alone in the world one place is just as good as another——"

"But——"

"Yes?" he questioned, looking at her.

"You—you will be getting married."

"No," he said. "No." And he shut his lips tightly.

For awhile neither of them spoke. The sun was just disappearing behind the down. Deadman's Rock stood up black and forbidding against a saffron sky. The wind was beginning to stir fitfully in the trees as it often does at sundown. Blackbirds were trilling in all directions. Across the fields came the bleating of sheep and lowing of kine. A dove cooed from a neighbouring tree. It was the most delicious hour of the day, soft and languorous. A thin haze was already beginning to arise from the cooling earth; from the fields and hedges the wind began to waft odours of camomile and henbane and clover. In the eastern sky a big yellow moon was sailing into sight. It was a moment for dreams, for romance, for love-making.

Why should he not tell her? His heart was throbbing with the hot fever of his desire. He could not—would not believe that she really loved Smut. How could she? She had not known him long enough, and besides——

He pulled up his thoughts with a jerk. What a fool he was. Would he make her his wife, if he could, and drag her down to poverty? Would he see her in a farm kitchen, her fair hands red and chapped, her round arms coarsened with wind and sun, her life a drudgery among calves and fowls, her grace and beauty wasting in a sordid struggle with sordid things?

"I am not sure that I am a farmer at heart," he said slowly, as if thinking aloud. "I am too much of an idealist in one direction, and too fastidious in

another. I love nature—the sweet, clean hills and fields; but I never loved a farmyard. I hate mud and untidiness.”

She raised her eyes to his, but did not speak. He smiled a wry, crooked smile before he went on again : “You spoke just now of getting married. There again my fastidiousness comes in. The woman I see in my dreams would not fit into the general scheme. She is too dainty, she dresses in soft materials, her hands are white and shapely, her feet are encased in dainty slippers, she hasn’t been coarsened by struggle and hardship, she is always sweet and wholesome—something to delight the eye as well as warm the heart. But on a farm like Crowdale the woman must work—in the fields at haytime and harvest, out of doors constantly, among the cattle and poultry and pigs; indoors, cooking and butter making and scrubbing. Oh, no. My heart used to ache for dear old mother. She toiled from six o’clock in the morning till nine o’clock at night all the year round, toiled till all sense of beauty died out of her, till nothing mattered save utility, till pretty things were waste and extravagance, till romance was dead.”

“But she was happy.”

“Happy? Oh, no. She rarely laughed, rarely had a pleasure. She did not complain much. She accepted life as she found it, and tried to make the best of it. She was not sorry when the end came.”

“Then you would like women to be just pretty, useless dolls?”

“Pretty, yes; but not useless. I cannot explain myself very well. Women and men are different—essentially, eternally different. I hate to see women invading men’s coarse sphere, sacrificing their dainti-

ness, their charm, their femininity, growing coarse and masculine, and from man's point of view unlovely."

"But if a man is poor his wife should help him, surely?"

"No doubt. And if she is a true wife she does help him by her patience and love and courage."

"But she may have to become the breadwinner. He may fall sick."

"Yes, I know; and I would rather die than that my wife should delve in the fields for me."

"But there is other work than digging on a farm."

"Ah, now you are getting out of Milor parish," he said with a laugh. "My world so far has been Crowdale Farm. I saw what my mother did, what she had to do to keep things going, and I would rather drown myself than see the woman I love coarsen by the same hard fate."

"The woman I love, eh?" she said banteringly, and she glanced at him with a smile and a blush.

"Did I say that?" he questioned, reddening. "Well, suppose it were so, do you not approve?"

"I am not sure that I do," she answered, looking beyond him. "If people love each other I do not think money matters so much."

"But how can a woman have dainty things if she has no money to buy them? How keep herself sweet and wholesome if she has to scrub, and cook, and all that kind of thing?"

She withdrew her eyes from the down again and looked at him, and a smile stole over her face. "Is dress so much," she questioned shyly, "and love so little?"

"Love is everything," he said impulsively. "But

don't you see if a man doesn't care, then his wife may look as she likes, dress as she likes, grow coarse and masculine, if she likes? But if he really loves he is jealous of everything. It would hurt him terribly to see her deprived of what she has been accustomed to, and growing hard and querulous under the stress of bad times."

"Need she grow hard and querulous? And might she not look as dainty in a cotton gown as in silks and lace?"

"I admit I have put my case very badly," he said, punching the ground with the end of his crutch. "Possibly I am too much of an idealist, and unfortunately my dreams lie beyond my station."

"Ah!" Then her eyes fell suddenly, and whatever she intended to say was left unspoken.

After a moment she rose to her feet and held out her hand to him.

"I am going away the day after to-morrow," she said, "and may not see you again for a very long time."

"Going away?" he questioned with knitted brows.

"My stepmother is very unwell, and my father wants me home."

"But I thought you were coming to live in this neighbourhood?"

"The negotiations appear to have fallen through. The landlord refused to make the alterations that father wanted, so we are chained to London for some time longer."

"And you don't like London?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I think there is no place like it in the world. Of course, I love the country in

the summer, and I am always happy with Uncle John. But in the winter, other things being equal, London is just splendid."

"I am very grateful to you for all your kindness to me," he said after a pause, "and—and—I hope you will be very happy." He did not look at her as he spoke, and a moment or two later she had passed out of sight.

He limped home slowly on his single crutch with a bitter sense of pain and of the incompleteness of things gnawing at his heart. He told himself that it was a good thing she was going away, and that the sooner she and Smut got married the better it would be for him. While she remained single and at Milor Hall he was always hoping and dreaming impossible things; but when she was actually married and hope had nothing left to feed upon, then he would put her out of his heart and forget her.

On the following morning he was not at all surprised when Smut announced that he intended getting back to London at the end of the week.

"The truth is," Smut explained, "I really cannot do any work here, and I am bound to do some reading if I am to get through my exams."

"We shall miss you," Taffy said quietly. "But, of course, you must do what you think best."

He knew, however, that Smut's real reason was very different from the one he had given. But he made no allusion to Sheila, nor was her name mentioned between them again.

CHAPTER XV

AUNT JANE'S INNINGS

ON the evening before the departure of Smut Aunt Jane got her innings. She had waited an opportunity for a good many days. Smut was as good as engaged to the squire's niece—at least, so the gossips said—and Aunt Jane accepted the gossip as gospel truth. The time had come, therefore, for her to put in her claim. If he should not happen to be in his most generous mood he would, at least, be in his most squeezable mood. A man violently in love and just engaged will sacrifice a good deal rather than let his treasure slip.

Smut was in his room packing his portmanteau. He was very quiet over the matter. Aunt Jane could hear his footfalls now and then on the threadbare carpet—that was all. Some men used a great many expletives when they were packing. Smut did not even whistle.

She stood near the door with a white, drawn face. It was not an easy task she had set herself. There would be a scene, no doubt. Smut had a most violent temper when he was roused. In that respect he was a thorough Longton.

She made a movement toward the door several times, and then drew back again. Her heart was beating uncomfortably fast, and her knees threatened to give way under the excitement. The little speech she had prepared and had rehearsed a dozen times

had completely gone out of her mind. She felt almost in a state of collapse.

"I'm a big fool," she said to herself, "that's what I be. What is there to be afeared of?" And she squared her shoulders and tried to look defiant.

A moment later she was knocking timidly at his door.

"Come in," he called. And she pushed open the door and entered.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said pleasantly. "You are just the person I want. Would you mind helping me to fold these things?"

"What things?" she questioned awkwardly. His pleasant manner disarmed her and made her task more difficult than ever.

"Oh, these coats more particularly," he answered a little petulantly. "I never can get the blamed things right."

"It's as easy as tumbling downstairs," she said, with a nervous laugh. "Are you going by the first train to-morrow?"

"By the ten train. I suppose you'll be glad to be rid of me?"

"Oh, no, not at all. You ain't been a bit of trouble. I expect, if the truth was known, you're glad to go."

"For some things, yes. But I have had a good time here—on the whole. Thank you very much; that is first rate. I shall be able to manage now."

Aunt Jane straightened herself and folded her arms, and for several moments there was an uneasy silence.

"I wanted to have a talk with you before you went away," she said abruptly; then paused again.

"Yes?" he questioned indifferently, without looking up. He was squeezing a pair of socks into a corner of his portmanteau.

"It's about your mother, and what she said to you before she died."

"About what?" he questioned, with a startled look in his eyes, and he stood straight up and faced her.

"About your mother and——"

"You know nothing about my mother," he said angrily and scornfully. "She did not belong to your set."

"Oh, didn't she, when she was my own sister! You know well enough what I mean!"

He laughed in mock defiance, but his face had grown livid. "In the name of Heaven, what are you talking about, woman?" he said. "I am not Taffy."

"I know that very well. You are not Taffy, but you are Peter Longton's son all the same."

He laughed again loudly and derisively. "I always knew you were a bit eccentric, Aunt Jane," he said, "but I did not know you were clean off your nut."

"You'll discover before you're much older," she retorted, "that I'm in my senses as much as you—perhaps a bit more; and what I've got to say here and now is this: that if I'm to keep your secret, I'm going to be paid for it. That's plain enough, ain't it?"

"But I have no secret for you to keep," he said mildly. "For the life of me I don't understand what you are driving at," and he sat down on the nearest chair and pushed his hands deep into his trousers pockets.

For a moment she regarded him in silence. He certainly looked as innocent and ignorant as he professed to be. His face betrayed no sign of fear or misgiving. He looked up into her eyes with perfect candour.

"You're a deep one, you are," she said at length. "You pretend that you don't know nothing," and she glared at him angrily and clenched her hands; "but you are not going to get over me, young man, remember that."

"But will you tell me what it is all about, Aunt Jane?" he said, with a pleasant laugh. "You've evidently some kind of bee in your bonnet——"

"Not a bee in my bonnet, but facts in my brain," she interrupted stoutly. "Will you tell me what my sister Ruth told you when you came to see her before she died?"

"Well, really, I don't know why I should," he answered, smiling pleasantly. "It was nothing of importance, and, if I remember aright, it had nothing to do with you."

"But it had to do with you," she retorted.

"Well, on the face of it, that would seem probable," he smilingly assented.

"Do you know I heard what she said?"

"Did you really? How interesting. Won't you tell me all about it?" and he drew a silver cigarette case from his pocket, and selected a cigarette with great deliberation. "Do tell me all about it, Aunt Jane," and he struck a match on the bottom of his boot.

"Well, you are a cool one," she said, with ill-concealed anger and chagrin. She felt somehow that he was getting the best of the encounter. The easy

victory she had expected was not so easy as it looked. What if she had heard her sister's confession? She could prove nothing. Besides, she suddenly remembered "that he was learning to be a lawyer," and lawyers were terrible people to get into the hands of.

She was not, however, going to beat a retreat thus early. She might not be able to prove anything, but she could make things very awkward for him by telling her story; plenty of people would believe it. Anybody with half an eye could see that he bore far more resemblance to the Longtons than Taffy did. In fact, Taffy was not a Longton at all.

"You know very well," she continued, "that you are not Ralph Discombe at all. Your mother sent for you to tell you that. It was on her conscience for more than twenty years, and she couldn't die easy without telling you. Taffy is Mr. Discombe's son, and you're using his name, and wearing his shoes, and living on his money—and you know it."

He sprang suddenly to his feet, his eyes blazing. "You lie," he said, and he brought his clenched fist close to her face. "I see your game at length, you contemptible vermin. You would slander your sister's name and perjure your own soul for the sake of blackmailing me. But I tell you it won't work. I'll have you in prison for this."

She shrank away from him for a moment with a cowed look in her eyes, but she quickly recovered herself.

"You may put me in prison," she hissed, "but you can't prevent people believing the story when once it gets abroad."

The shot struck home, and for a moment the colour left his face again. "There are always evil-

minded people who will believe lies rather than the truth," he admitted. "But what of that? It can make no difference to me. I am not going to live in the parish of Milor."

"The girl may refuse to marry you if there's any doubt about your name," she sneered.

She saw him wince and his hands clench and unclench. But he had got himself in hand again.

"Oh, as to that," he said indifferently, "I don't intend to get married just yet; and when you are in gaol, proved to be a liar and blackmailer, people will soon forget your story."

"You'd better think twice before you let the story get out," she said. "You know what I've told you is the truth, though you call me a liar. Poor Ruth expected you would own up and let Taffy come into his own. I knew better. You're a Longton, and the Longtons are not built that way."

"Do you mean to tell me you will risk going to prison?" he asked fiercely.

"I'll risk hell," she said defiantly. "You've no more right to the Discombe money than I have, and if you don't give me a share of it I'll tell everything your mother confessed to you."

"I can assure you," he said, and he spoke with admirable self-control and a pleasant smile on his thin lips, "I shall not give you a single cent. It would be cowardly on my part to do so. It would be conniving at a fraud. Tell the story where you like, let believe it who may, and I will prosecute you as a blackmailer with the utmost rigour of the law."

"I am not afraid of your law," she snapped.

"And I am not afraid of your lies," he answered quietly, and with an air of sincerity. "You know

that there is not a word of truth in your story—that you have invented every syllable of it, and I can assure you that no judge or jury in the land would have any pity on a woman who would defame the memory of her dead sister.”

For a few moments she did not reply. Then she said: “I’m not coming before any judge or jury, but I’ll be even with you all the same. You’ve called me a liar and a vermin, and I’m not going to forget it. You can’t hinder me telling to others—to my husband—what my sister told me. You can’t prosecute me for that. I’m not going to blackmail you, as you call it. I don’t ask you for a penny, young man. Oh, no, I despise your money; but what my sister told me I’m at liberty to tell. She only made one condition, and that was that it wasn’t to be told before she died. Well, she’s dead now, and I’m free to speak. It’s only right as Taffy should know and that everybody should know. You’ll be able to stick to the gold very likely, though Eliza Tamblyn as is—who was servant to your mother and give you and Taffy your nicknames—might make things a bit awkward for you.”

She saw him wince, but he was not to be betrayed again into losing his self-control.

“Go on,” he said quietly; “you talk exceedingly well. Your inventive genius is quite remarkable. I really had no idea till to-day that you had such a vivid imagination. If you had only been educated you might have made a fortune as a writer of fiction.”

“You’ll sneer on the other side of your mouth before this time to-morrow,” she said bitingly.

“I may do many things by this time to-morrow,” he said, with pretended indifference, “but one thing

is quite certain, I shall not be frightened by you," and he knelt on the floor again and began pushing other small articles into his portmanteau.

Jane Jupp looked perplexed, and felt what she looked. It was her first attempt in the art of baiting, and she was not clever at it. Smut's general coolness and apparent unconcern surprised her. She had expected him to surrender at once; his boldness discomfited her.

"It is very foolish of you, Aunt Jane, to talk to me in this way," he went on, after a pause. "I have been a friend of the family for years, as you know; I have the power to be so still——"

"You are Ruth's son," she persisted, "and you know it."

"Well, let us suppose you honestly think so," he continued in the same pleasant tone. "You cannot prove it; and, what is more, by your own conduct you have made your evidence untrustworthy."

"What do you mean?" she demanded hotly.

"I mean this. Your sister bore a good name to the end. You heard what the vicar said at the funeral. You will persuade nobody to believe she was guilty of this crime. On the other hand——"

"Yes, go on," she snapped, seeing he hesitated.

"On the other hand, Aunt Jane, people would say that a woman who would stoop to listening at a keyhole would just as readily stoop to lying."

"I shouldn't tell people that I listened at the keyhole," she said defiantly. "I should say that Ruth told me with her own lips."

"I must say you are getting to be a pretty hardened liar," he remarked.

"I'm not such a liar as you are," she retorted,

"and not such a rogue either. I'm amazed that you can brazen it out before Taffy, when you know all the time that you are cheating him out of his rights."

"Oh, this is all balderdash," he laughed, "and you must know that your silly bubble is pricked."

"But I say it ain't," she snarled. "Oh, my young man, don't you be so cocksure. I'm going to tell the truth whatever comes or goes."

"People will quickly understand what your truth is worth when I tell them that you first tried to blackmail me."

"Some truth is convincing if the Devil tells it," she answered back; "and you are so much like the Longtons that only a word need be said and the thing will go. Besides, I shall be able to tell how the change was carried out. There's dozens of people as remember how Taffy got lost."

"Oh, I don't deny that there are some people who would believe such a cock-and-bull story," he said indifferently. "Every man is more or less at the mercy of lying and spiteful tongues. If you fling mud enough, some of it will stick. I quite realise all that. I shall have to put up with it, that's all. It's rather hard, I admit. I have done no harm to you or yours, but if you choose to blacken your sister's memory and perhaps unsettle Taffy for the rest of his life—well——" and he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

Jane Jupp had an uneasy feeling that she was getting worsted, but that only made her the more determined to fight the matter out to the end. She was conscious that Smut's brain was too nimble for her slow wits, but she was not going to give in. She had overheard her sister's confession—that point was

clear enough. She knew and Smut knew that he was not Henry Discombe's son. For weeks she had cherished the idea of making money out of the secret, and it was terribly disappointing as well as humiliating to be so completely foiled.

"It ain't in woman's nature to hold her tongue when there's nothing to be gained by it," she flung at him. "Very likely, when I tell Taffy what he's heir to, he'll be a bit more generous."

"There's certainly nothing to be gained when once she has let her tongue loose," he laughed. "You'd better try it on with Taffy to-night, and see what you get by it."

"But you don't deny, if I let the secret out, it would make things unpleasant for you?"

"Don't call it a secret," he said impatiently; "call it a silly fable."

"It ain't a fable," she snarled, "it's the truth, and you know it's the truth; and you'd rather I'd keep my mouth shut, wouldn't you?"

"Why, certainly," he said. "But you may as well understand first as last that you are not going to intimidate me. I'm not that sort. Moreover, the law of libel is not a dead letter in this country."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of your laws," she laughed defiantly. "I know what I'm about."

"I don't think you do," he said quietly, "or you would not try to make an enemy of a man who has been your friend."

"Oh, I admit you've been kind, in a way," she growled.

"And I would like to be kind to you still," he said, "for your dead sister's sake; but if you set yourself deliberately and maliciously to wrong me,

to slander me, to lie about me—well, so be it,” and he shrugged his shoulders again.

“And, if I wanted help, you’d help me?”

“If you *really* wanted help—yes.”

“Well, I do want help. Ned and I are terrible poor, as you must know.”

“Then why in the name of common sense did you not say so at the beginning?”

“Oh, never mind that,” she said, with gleaming eyes. “Will you let me have fifty pounds?”

“Certainly not,” he answered sharply. “I will give you twenty pounds with pleasure, and that ought to go a long way in your position in life.”

“No, it won’t go far,” she said. “You don’t know the pickle we are in.”

“I’m sorry if you are in debt,” he said; “but let me hear from you in a month’s time. I wouldn’t like to see anyone want who was so kind to my foster-mother.”

Her lip curled sarcastically, but she did not reply.

“But,” he went on, “if you try to do me the least harm, I’m your enemy to the end of the chapter.”

She regarded him for some time in silence and with half-closed eyes. She had not got all she wanted by a very long way, but she had got something, and she saw a way of getting more.

“When will you let me have the twenty pounds?” she inquired at length.

“To-morrow morning.”

She did not say thank you, and a moment or two later she left the room.

CHAPTER XVI

DRIFTING

ON reaching Waterloo, Smut[†] drove at once to his club and ordered tea. He was glad, he told himself, to be in the region of civilisation again. London was filling up rapidly after the August exodus. He had already seen several people he knew slightly. He heard two young fellows at an adjoining table discussing their golfing exploits on the east coast. As he drove from Waterloo the streets seemed unusually crowded. Yes, he was glad to be in London again. Its movement, its colour, the hum and throb of its multitudinous life quickened his pulse and stirred his imagination.

When he had finished his tea he lay back in his easy chair and closed his eyes. Through the open windows came the roar of the streets, rising and falling like the sound of the sea on a still night. There was nothing harsh or dissonant about it. It did not vex him, it soothed him; it seemed friendly and companionable.

For the first time for months he felt strangely alone in the world. Since he left Oxford in June he had lived almost entirely with friends and acquaintances; now he was a unit in the biggest city in the world.

Free, no doubt—free to go and come as he pleased. Free to employ his time as he pleased. Free to enjoy himself in his own way without anyone to ask

impertinent questions. Within a stone's throw from where he sat twenty theatres and music-halls threw open their doors, and within the same radius the most sumptuous restaurants in Europe allured.

Yes, he could enjoy himself ; there was no doubt of that. He intended to have a good dinner to-night. He had not dined properly since he left Ravenscourt. Sir John Merton kept a very poor table in comparison with Sir Jonathan Cuff. As for the table at Crowdale Farm—well, they never dined there. They got meals, that was all that could be said.

To-night he intended to dine properly—not at the club ; no, he would go out, perhaps to the Carlton, or the Ritz, or he might look in at Princes or the Trocadero, and after dinner he would drop in at some theatre ; he would ask the hall porter what there was on. He had not been in London for such a long time that he felt a little behind the age.

He got up at length and walked to the window and looked down into the street. What a busy, bustling sight it was—growlers, hansom, taxis, motors, 'buses, lorries, vehicles of all descriptions, rushing this way and that, and people crowding the side-walks as far as eye could reach. How different from the quiet and seclusion of Crowdale Farm.

Yet as he looked a sense of loneliness came over him. Thirty or forty people were in the room, some chatting, some sitting alone smoking, a few drinking tea, one or two asleep, the others deep in newspapers ; not one of them was he intimate with. He went back to his chair again and lighted a cigarette. His eyes wandered up to the deeply panelled ceiling and then down to the portraits on the walls. It was a handsomely appointed room, but he was in no humour to

be impressed by its luxury. He felt nervous and ill at ease. He had money and leisure, and all the so-called pleasures of life were within his reach. There was no one to spy on him or take him to task, or read him moral homilies if his conduct did not square with ordinary standards. He was his own master. He could work or idle just as he liked. Surely he ought to be a happy man.

And yet in truth he was intensely miserable. The discovery the previous evening that Aunt Jane knew his secret spoiled everything. After a one-sided fight he had succeeded in getting the better of his conscience. He had ceased to trouble about the fact that his life was a daily fraud and hypocrisy. He could lie now quite easily and without the least hesitation; he was compelled to lie if he meant to keep his position. He had got so used to it that he did not mind in the least.

It was doubly annoying therefore when conscience had been dethroned to have fear set up in its place. He had no doubt whatever that Jane Jupp had heard his mother's confession. She was not the kind of woman to invent such a story—she had not sufficient imagination. She had, however, what was much more dangerous as far as he was concerned, and that was a good deal of cunning.

He could not hide from himself the fact that she had got the whip hand; to what extent she might use it remained to be seen. That he had managed her very well the previous evening was no doubt quite true. He was rather proud of the way in which he had cornered her. But the tantalising fact remained that she knew, and without very careful treatment she might tell. And if she told, if suspicion were once

aroused, things could be made mightily uncomfortable for him.

He had had a hard battle with conscience, but his battle with fear was likely to be much more severe and much more prolonged. In fact he would never feel quite safe as long as his aunt lived.

That she would be always asking for money he knew. He had used high and mighty language about being blackmailed, but she had won her point notwithstanding. The money he had given her was blackmail, and the worst of it was she knew it. He had called it by another name, had pretended it was to help her out of a temporary difficulty; but it was "hush-money" all the same, and he would have to go on paying "hush-money" so long as she demanded it. He wondered how long that would be. It might be for twenty years, or more, unless——

He got up from his chair and went to the window again. He was startled by his own thoughts. He ought to be horrified; but he was not horrified in the least, only startled. Conscience had ceased to trouble him. He had slid farther down the slope than he knew.

He went to his room at length and got into evening clothes, and then sauntered forth to dine at his leisure. The streets were warm and close. The houses and pavements seemed to fling back the heat they had absorbed during the day. Knots of people had already gathered round the early doors of the theatres. The crossings were blocked with taxis and motor-cars. Piccadilly Circus was like a brilliant kaleidoscope with its ever-shifting crowds.

He felt better out of doors than at the club. The movement of the streets quickened his blood. He

forgot Aunt Jane and her threats. He became interested in the people—the beautiful women in the motor-cars, the equally beautiful women on foot. His thoughts went back to Sheila Leyland. In all this bewildering crowd there was no face that could compare with hers. He got the key to his sense of loneliness now. It was Sheila he wanted. She was the great desire of his heart. How thankful he was that in a day or two he would see her again, for of course he would call on her and be introduced to her father and stepmother. He should not have come to London so soon, but for the fact that she was returning home. She would guess of course what was in his mind and be prepared for the definite proposal he intended to make as soon as possible.

He felt pretty sure of his ground. He had already got Sir John on his side. He believed also that Peggy had done her best for him; while as for Sheila—well, no one could be more gracious than she had been.

He was thinking of Sheila when he sat down at a small table glittering with cut glass and silver, and gay with flowers. At the end of the room a string band was discoursing waltz music, and all round him were well-dressed people, mostly in couples, laughing and talking to each other. It was a very animated scene, but somehow he felt remote and isolated. There was not much fun after all in dining alone. If only Sheila were with him——

Just opposite him was a very beautiful woman in rich evening dress, her face alight with animation, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. He could not see the face of the man to whom she was talking, but he could not help envying him. How happy he must

be with such a companion. No doubt he loved her as he himself loved Sheila. Ah, when he and Sheila were engaged they would come here frequently. There would be real enjoyment if she were with him.

He ordered a bottle of expensive wine. He needed something more than food to raise his spirits. The discovery of the previous evening still hung over him like a cloud. Would the presence of Sheila be sufficient to disperse it, he wondered. Would it not torment him always, or as long as Jane Jupp lived ?

"I wish the woman were dead," he said to himself as he half emptied his glass.

He did not realise how slippery was the place in which he stood. Yet he was conscious of the fact that morally he was daily losing ground. It could not be otherwise; for months past he had been doing his best to trample his better nature beneath his feet.

Before he had finished his dinner the wine began to take effect. His depression entirely left him, his feeling of remoteness passed away. It was good to be alive after all. The dinner was excellent, the music voluptuous, the wine exactly to his taste.

"Coffee, sir?" said the waiter as he brought on the dessert.

Smut nodded and helped himself to some grapes.

"French or Turkish, sir?"

"French, please."

With the coffee appeared the cigar steward, with his assortment of tobaccos and liqueurs.

Smut was in the mood when he could say no to nothing. He was out for the evening—out to enjoy himself. He could afford the best of everything, and he intended to have it.

So he sat with a cup of coffee before him, a glass

of liqueur by its side, and a shilling cigar in his mouth.

He did not trouble about the flight of time. He was enjoying himself hugely. Care had slipped from him like a mantle. He was at peace with himself and the world.

When he reached the street he found, as someone said, that the wind had got under the pavement. The outside porter suggested a taxi, a suggestion that Smut adopted without parley. He felt too exhilarated to walk any distance.

He reached the theatre during the interval between the first and second acts. By his vacant chair was a man he knew slightly at Oxford. He had also seen him at one or two of the Temple dinners. They struck up an acquaintance at once. They were both out for the evening, out to enjoy themselves.

Smithson suggested that at the close of the performance they should go to the Savoy to supper. "Ripping supper," Smithson declared, "and ripping company. Lots of the actresses turn up, and they are jolly."

Smut fell in with the arrangement with alacrity. He was vaguely conscious that he had lost some measure of self-control, but that did not worry him. Why should he worry about anything? He had worried a great deal too much during the last month or two. His business now was to enjoy himself. If there was any danger of the good time ever coming to an end it was only an additional reason why he should enjoy himself now. The Savoy exactly suited Smut's mood. The huge restaurant was well filled when he got there; others were arriving, chiefly in motors, every few minutes. Diamonds flashed on

bare necks in all directions. Laughter rippled above the hum of voices. People nodded to each other across glittering tables. Waiters in uniform were rushing hither and thither, and everybody appeared to be in the highest possible spirits.

Smut did not eat much, but he drank more wine than usual. Smithson knew a great many people and introduced his friend. Smut was too excited to discriminate. The hour grew late. Liqueurs followed coffee. The air was heavy with the fumes of tobacco. Women smoked as well as men.

It was noon when Smut got out of bed next day. His head ached, his tongue was parched, and he felt a little bit ashamed of himself.

He quickly pulled himself together, however.

"What does it matter?" he reflected a little bitterly. "I know what I am very well, and there's no use in pretending, at least to myself. A man who lies and cheats and lives on the property of another has no call to be squeamish over other matters. Having swallowed the camel, I needn't strain at the gnat."

Nevertheless, he felt ill at ease all the day. He was losing ground, and he was conscious of it. He had lost his self-respect. Other people might not know that he was a cheat and an impostor, but he knew it himself, and the knowledge was like the letting out of blood. His moral strength was slowly ebbing away.

It was the first time since he listened to his mother's confession that he had found himself alone. He seemed unconsciously to have cut all moral and social restraints. At Ravenscourt and at Crowdale

he was out of the way of temptation. Moreover, in both places there were restraining hands, as it were.

He almost groaned when he thought of Sheila. He knew that he was not worthy of her. Her goodness and purity made his own weakness appear all the more contemptible. How could he go to one whose life was truth with a lie upon his lips? And yet he loved her. He was quite sure of that. He had never desired anything so much before. It was partly the hope of winning her that made him stick to Taffy's fortune.

And yet had not the deceit raised an impassable barrier between them? Even if he married her the barrier would remain. He could never climb up to her level while he lived a daily falsehood. No great character could be built on dishonour.

Night came, and he sauntered forth into the streets again to find forgetfulness and amusement. Alone with himself, he grew morbid and introspective. He could not read, for he found it impossible to fix his attention on any book. To sit brooding while London roared around him with excitement was folly. He resolved, however, to keep a firmer hand upon himself. He would drink enough to raise his spirits, but not enough to dull his senses.

He was bound to do something to keep his thoughts away from unpleasant subjects until he had found "digs" and had settled down to work.

"The sooner I start reading law seriously the better it will be for me," he said to himself. "I'm but a weak fool at best, and if left alone with nothing to do I shall drift into mischief. Not that it matters much," he added after a long pause. "I shall never

be able to pose as a saint, or even flatter myself on being an honest man, whatever comes or goes."

His thoughts drifted away to Sheila after a few moments. "She will be coming up to-morrow or the day following," he reflected. "I wish she were here now. I wish I were really engaged to her. I shall propose to her directly I have seen her father. Bless her, she will be able to make a man of me. I have never felt so heroic in my life as when by her side."

But in a few minutes his mood changed again. How could a woman, however great or good she might be, make anything of a man who deliberately chose to be a rogue? Before he could even begin to ascend he would have to make restitution, and that he knew very well he would never do. He loved ease, idleness, pleasure, and those things could only be purchased with money.

As fortune, or misfortune, would have it, he stumbled across Smithson at the very next turning.

"Hello, Discombe; whither away?" he asked in his cheeriest manner.

"I thought of dropping into the 'Cri.' for a bit of dinner," Smut said indifferently.

"Anywhere after that?"

"No; I'm going to bed early to-night."

"Oh, you are, are you? We'll talk about that later on," and he took Smut by the arm and led him away in the opposite direction.

"Where are you taking me to?" Smut asked at length with a laugh.

"To the ——."

"No, you are not," Smut answered, stopping suddenly. "Oh, no. I draw the line there."

"As you like," Smithson said with some reluctance. "But I can assure you it is very good, and frightfully lively."

"So I've heard. But suppose we try the Carlton instead."

"Rather beyond the range of my pocket, friend."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, let me stand the racket to-night."

Smithson raised no further objection. To dine well at somebody else's expense was a thing to be enjoyed.

The dinner proceeded leisurely. Conversation tripped lightly over many topics.

"I wonder you grind at the law," Smithson said after an unusually long pause.

"Why?"

"Well, why should you? You have plenty of money."

"I have a living."

"Then leave the field to the poor devils who haven't."

"But a man must do something."

"I don't see why. Surely work is not an end in itself. But perhaps you are fond of it."

"No, I'm not; I hate it."

"Then why write yourself down a fool by sticking to it? Why, man, if I had a thousand a year safe I'd never do another stitch of work as long as I lived."

"What would you do?"

"Nothing! I'd just enjoy myself."

"Wouldn't that very soon pall?"

"Pall? Why, man, in a place like London there is infinite and everlasting variety."

"I doubt it. A man must employ himself somehow."

"Then let him do what he likes, not what he hates."

"Do you like the law?"

"Better, I think, than anything else. Besides, there's money in it if one can get a start. You see where I am."

Smut laughed and then the conversation drifted away to some other topic.

It was very late when Smut got to bed again in spite of his resolution, and the next morning he felt so irritable that he kept indoors all day.

On the day following he dressed himself with unusual care and made his way soon after lunch in the direction of Kensington.

He had made up his mind to lay his heart and fortune at Sheila Leyland's feet without any further delay. He told himself that he could not live without her. That she was not merely necessary to his happiness, but to his safety. Without her he would drift like a helpless log, with her he would ride safely like a ship at anchor.

Minor questions he put aside as of no moment. The past was dead and buried and could not be lived over again. The future was uncertain and unknown. His business was to make the best of the present. With Sheila by his side he could defy fate and be happy.

So with hope beating high he rang the bell and was shown into the presence of the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XVII

A FRESH START

TAFFY received a brief letter from Smut announcing his arrival in London. After that he heard no more from him till Christmas. He heard also, incidentally, that Sheila had taken her departure from the Hall. Then life's drab monotony settled down upon his heart like a November fog.

For several weeks he felt more depressed than ever in his life before. He missed Smut more than he could have thought possible. Jealous as he had been of him, he was good company. Somehow Smut kept him in touch with the great outside world that he had read about but never seen.

He missed his foster-mother also in a hundred ways. Then Aunt Jane took her departure, and he was obliged to get his principal hand and his wife to live in the house. This arrangement lasted only a few weeks. He had planned to keep on the farm till the following spring, but housekeeping under the new conditions became impossible, so he decided to leave it as soon as he could get anybody to take it off his hands.

This proved easy enough. When it became known that he intended to sublet the farm for the period of his lease, half a dozen people were quite prepared to take it, prepared to take also, at a valuation, the crops, implements, cattle and furniture.

For a week or two Taffy lived like a man in a

dream. He had no time to brood, no time to consider what he would do when he was out of the farm; and when at length the day came, and he realised for the first time that he was homeless and alone, with scarcely a friend or relative in the world, he was strongly tempted to shake the dust of England from his feet and go away to the far west of Canada or the United States, and try to forget that such a place as Crowdale existed.

For the first time in his life he had a considerable sum of money in his pocket. He was surprised to find how the items had mounted up. In the past he had thought only of profits, and they had been small enough in all conscience. Now, when he came to realise his capital, he was much better off than he had imagined—indeed, he felt absurdly rich. To be in possession—not of a score or two pounds—but of hundreds was like an Aladdin's dream.

At the end of the lane he turned and looked back at the house where he had lived all his life, and a wave of great tenderness swept over his heart. It was the only home he had ever known; it was associated with all his boyish hopes and dreams; it was sanctified by the few brief visits of the woman he would never cease to love; it was endeared to him by the very struggles and hardships through which he had passed.

Now he was leaving it for ever. The old life had come to a sudden end, and he was making a fresh start, not knowing what lay before him—what perils or pitfalls might lurk in his path.

Had he some definite plan or purpose in his mind, he would have felt more at his ease. But he had given himself no time to think what lay beyond the

breaking-up of his old life. For a fortnight or three weeks he had lived in a whirlwind. The ending of the old order absorbed all his energies. Now that it was ended he was completely adrift.

What next?

He had no answer to that question. It had been easy enough to pull down, to break up the old home, to cut himself free from the old moorings. But what was to follow? Where was the new home to be built? What was to be its pattern?

For months and years he had dreamed vaguely of many things. Had chafed at the ordinary farmer's antiquated ways, had resented the inadequacy of the means of transit and the machinery for exchange and sale, and had wondered if something could not be done by which a readier and a better market might be secured.

It was easy to grumble at the railway company and at the exorbitant charges made for the carriage of farm produce, but he was quite sure that all the fault did not lie in that direction. What was wanted was a local clearing house. It was sheer waste of labour and expense to send a hundred separate parcels when one big parcel might be made to answer the purpose.

Moreover, a pioneer was needed to introduce new methods and break up the old conservatism. It was all very well to sing in church on Sunday, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen," but it was bad doctrine for the Monday and the other days of the week. Everywhere else the world was changing—adopting new methods to meet altered conditions—but on an English farm nothing changed. Since he could remember, not a

single innovation had been made on Crowdale Farm, and what was true of Crowdale was true of a dozen other farms in the neighbourhood.

Could he do anything? He was young, he had energy, he had a few ideas, and he had a little money.

He pondered that question as he tramped to Blakeney. For the moment Blakeney represented the beginning of the new order. The bank was there where he would have to deposit his money. It was the local railway centre, the marketing place of a wide district.

He had no difficulty in getting lodgings, and at a very reasonable rate. He might have gone to the big new hotel by the station and made a splash, but his long habit of thrift and economy could not be uprooted in a day. Besides, the day might come when he would need every penny he possessed—perhaps more. No; he would have to economise still. He had heard his mother say that waste was the way to want.

He lay awake most of the night thinking—not very coherently. His thoughts refused to take any particularly definite shape; such ideas as he had were in a more or less fluid state. But, curiously and tantalisingly, through all his imaginings the face of Sheila Leyland came and went. He could shape no dream of the future, however vague it might be, in which she did not have a place.

Christmas came, and he got another brief letter from Smut, but he made no mention of Sheila.

Taffy tried from time to time to put her out of his mind and heart—it was foolish, he knew, to think of her at all—but her image refused to be dislodged.

In all his rambles across the country to see and interview farmers, she kept him company. In an undefined way she helped and inspired him.

His ideas and plans matured slowly. At first they were like motes in a sunbeam, but one by one they dropped into place. Here and there he found a farmer who was fully alive to fresh ideas and eager for change, but the majority shook their heads dubiously. What was good enough for their grandfathers would have to do for them. They looked askance at fresh methods, and were afraid to venture a single inch beyond where they had gone before.

He began in a small way. A "middleman," the farmers called him. A link between the quiet country and the bustling towns, between those who wanted to sell and those who wanted to buy. The local prices were regulated by the local demand, and the local demand often fell short of the supply. There were times when fruit was not worth gathering—there was no sale for it; times when eggs scarcely paid for the trouble of taking to market; times when bacon did not pay for feeding.

And all the while the distant cities were growing bigger and clamouring for more eggs, more poultry, more fruit. But the trouble was, and always had been, how to bring the supply within reach of the demand. That was the problem Taffy set himself to solve.

It saved the farmers a lot of trouble to have their eggs and poultry collected. It stimulated and encouraged them, also, when they received ready cash and top prices.

So the work of collection and distribution began—quietly, unostentatiously, without noise or bustle or advertisement. Taffy never dreamed of anything

big; his desire had been just as much to help his neighbours as to find employment for himself.

He found himself greatly interested. He was in touch with a world larger and more alert than he had ever known before. He had to bring into play his inventive faculty, to bargain for terms with railway officials, to strip bare the plausibilities of city merchants, to study the price lists in the latest editions, to watch the rise and fall of markets.

At the end of six months he had made expenses, but very little more; but the great thing was—as far as he was concerned—he had found something to do which he liked, something that required brain as well as muscle. He was no longer chained down to a lonely farm and doomed to the monotonous drudgery of the fields. At last he was alive, compelled to be alert and active. He felt the throb of the outside world, and was conscious of a hitherto undreamed-of force stirring in his blood.

He still lived in lodgings, and had no thought of anything else. If Sheila Leyland had never crossed his path he might have considered the question of marriage; but not now. She had changed the world for him. He had seen the best, had felt through every atom of his being what life might be, had loved unwittingly and almost unwillingly with a passion and fervour that still consumed him; and to accept anything else was just impossible. He did not argue the question at all, it found no place in his brain. Now and then some farmer with marriageable daughters would say to him, half seriously, half jokingly :

“I wonder you don’t get married, Mr. Longton. You’re old enough, and you can afford it.”

"Oh, yes, I'm old enough," he would laugh, "but I'm too busy to think about it."

"But people who think about it over long sometimes never get wed at all."

"And do you think they are any the worse off?"

"Oh, aye. It's natural for folks to mate. Besides, you're not doing your duty to the State."

"There's something in that, of course," he would laugh. "But, you see, being human, we think of ourselves first."

"But we oughtn't—leastways, not always. Besides, what can be better than a little home of your own, and a nice young woman to look after it?"

"It sounds alluring, I admit, and, providing a man can get the woman he wants, marriage is no doubt the ideal state."

"Oh, as to that, there ain't often any difficulty with the gals. If one says 'No,' there's plenty of others ready to say 'Yes.'"

"But a man does not want the 'plenty of others,'" he would laugh. "If a man is not a freak, there is one woman in the world for him, and only one, and if he cannot get her he had better save his soul by remaining single."

"But I never heard of you wanting any one in particular, Mr. Longton—that's the funny thing about you—the gals say you never look at them."

"Really?" and then he would turn the conversation into some other channel.

His popularity increased rapidly. He was so alert, so genial, so straightforward. Moreover, he showed a business aptitude, a gift of initiative that were quite new and strange to the quiet toilers of the fields.

People recalled Peter Longton and his slow-going, conservative ways. Where did this young man get his business insight and capacity? How came it about that he suddenly blossomed out into an alert commercial man?

If Taffy had known how often he was discussed in family circles, and by attractive and eligible young women, he would have blushed to his ear tips. Fortunately, he did not know, and he paid no attention to any of them.

He loved Sheila Leyland, and so long as he loved her he could think of no one else. Some day, perhaps, the wound in his heart might heal, the fire burn itself out, leaving only cold, grey ashes; but until that day came it would be impossible to think of any other woman.

He wondered sometimes if he would ever forget her. No doubt he would be happier if he could, just as a mother might be happier if she could forget her dead child. But did any bereaved mother want to forget?

He knew very well that he did not want to forget Sheila. What would there be left when she no longer existed for him? Happier? Yes; if the dead are happier than the living, if those who feel not are happier than those who feel.

He often wondered what had become of her. Smut's letters grew more and more rare and more and more unsatisfactory. Whether he had kept term again at Oxford or not, Taffy did not know. Each letter he had received had been written from London. Why was Smut in London all the time? Was it only on Sheila's account? Was he devoting all his time to her, and neglecting everything else?

Did he intend to go on with his studies, or did he intend to settle down on his income and do no more work?

To none of these questions could Taffy get an answer. He wanted to ask about Sheila when he wrote, but somehow he lacked the courage. If Smut chose to tell him anything he would be grateful, but he could not pry into other people's affairs. Besides, Smut might guess his secret, and he would not for the world that anyone should know.

Spring merged slowly into summer. May was a month of soft airs and brilliant sunshine. The woods clothed themselves in resplendent green, the downs were a blaze of gold. In the plantations purple billows of hyacinths rolled away into the dim distance. The daisies grew so abundantly that the green of the meadows was dappled with snow.

Taffy rode through Milor one evening and stopped to talk with Ezra Bray, the shoemaker, just outside the park gates.

"You're gettin' on, they tell me, terrible fast," Ezra said, glancing kindly at Taffy from underneath his shaggy brows.

"No, not terrible fast," Taffy answered, with a smile. "Things are just beginning to move a little."

"Wonder nobody ever thought of it before," Ezra grumbled.

"Thought of what?"

"Why, the thing you are doing now."

"Possibly a great many people thought of it, but lacked opportunity. You see, I was bound to do something."

"Bound? You could ha' stuck to the farm, couldn't you? People said you were daft to give it

up. Everything to hand, house ready and furnished, and heaps o' gals to be had for the asking."

Taffy laughed. "I was never very keen on farming," he said.

"So I've heard it said," was the reply; "and yet your father was a farmer, and his father afore him. But there, you bain't a bit like a Longton, and never was."

"Is that so?" he laughed, and turned the conversation. He wanted to know something about the Mertons—about Sheila, if possible. Ezra would be as likely to know as anybody. Most of the village gossip filtered through the shoemaker's shop.

"And how is business in Milor?" he questioned, with apparent indifference.

"Oh, none so good—bad, in fact, an' it'll be wuss afore it is better."

"Why worse?"

"Well, you see, the squire's gone away; shut up house for several months, and put all the servants on board wages."

"Oh! I had not heard."

"Went away day before yesterday. Gone up to London, and ain't coming home again, they be sayin', till after Miss Sheila's married."

Taffy gave a sudden gasp, and for a moment his heart seemed to stop. "I—I—was not aware Miss Leyland was to be married so soon," he stammered.

"Some time 'bout harvest, they be sayin'," Ezra grunted. "But there, you'll be hearin' all about it, I expect."

"Why should I hear all about it?" he laughed nervously.

"Well, he's almost like a brother, ain't he?"

"We are very good friends, of course."

"An' you'll be invited to the weddin'?"

Taffy shook his head. "I think not," he said; then stopped suddenly.

"An' the maid," Ezra went on. "You was very good friends, so I've heard 'em say. Didn't she find 'ee up on the down when you put your ankle out? She'll be wanting of 'ee to come if nobody else does."

"You think so? Well, it is just possible. It would be an experience to be best man, wouldn't it?" he said, with a poor attempt at jocularitv.

"Best man, eh? Well, you would be best man. I ain't sayin' no word again' Mr. Discombe, mind you—not I; but if I was a gal—— But there, what's the use o' talkin'? Money's the thing now-adays. It ain't a question of which is best man, but which has most money."

"Money is a very necessary thing, Ezra; we all admit that."

"Oh, aye. Only, mostly the wrong people get hold of it, somehow," and Ezra scratched his frowsy head as though meditating deeply.

Taffy rode slowly back to Blakeney, seeing nothing of the glory of the evening sky or the beauty of the surrounding country. In the cottage gardens the laburnums drooped in golden clusters, the lilacs filled the air with perfume, the chestnuts were great banks of green flecked with white, the hawthorns were powdered with summer snow.

Taffy saw nothing, smelt no fragrance, heard no music. One thought obsessed him and tore him with an anguish too deep for words.

He was not surprised. There had always been—since Smut became acquainted with Sheila—the possibility that he might marry her. He had made no secret of his intention.

And yet Taffy had hoped almost against hope. The thought of Sheila marrying he had resolutely put out of his mind—it was too painful to think about, it was one of those things that seemed out of harmony with the eternal order. He would not consider it until he was compelled to do so.

Now he had to face the bitter truth, and he writhed in poignant agony. He found himself at length at Jullef's livery stables, not knowing in the least how he got there.

"Good old Juno," he said as he dismounted, and he patted affectionately the horse's neck.

A few minutes later he was in the privacy of his own room. He would have to fight the old battle over again, and with as little prospect of winning the victory as before.

CHAPTER XVIII

AUNT JANE'S LEGACY

TAFFY carried himself bravely in spite of the pain that gnawed at his heart. No one guessed that he had a care, except such as rose from business worries, and those appeared to be very small. He had always a smile for the children and a cheery word for the old. He cracked his jokes with the farmers and sometimes with their wives; he was hail-fellow-well-met with the farmers' sons, but with the daughters he held no parley.

This apparent indifference to the charms of the fair sex was a little perplexing. Why should he be indifferent? He was of a marriageable age, was his own master, was clearly prospering in business, was on good terms with all the farmers in the district, and in addition was so good looking that he could have had his pick if he were so minded. And yet he kept all the fair ones at arm's length and refused to flirt when the chance was thrown at his head.

That he had already lost his heart no one suspected for a moment. Who was there to whom he had ever paid the smallest attention? Was he not a native of Milor parish? Had he not lived all his life at Crowdale Farm?

The fierce light that beats upon a throne is not to be compared with the light that beats on the head of an eligible young man in a country district. He may fancy that he passes to and fro and in and out quite

unnoticed. Never was a greater mistake. His doings are canvassed to the minutest details. It is known what time he gets up in the morning and what time he retires at night, what horse he rides, what clothes he wears, what places he visits. If he stops in the street or in the market house to speak to Miss Jones or Miss Brown, it is retailed as an important item of news. Whether he smiled or appeared indifferent, whether he laughed or looked cross will be discussed with animation and profound interest.

It was known, of course, that Taffy had been on speaking terms with Sir John Merton's beautiful niece, but no one attached the smallest importance to the fact. She was out of his world. She belonged to the aristocracy, while he was only a farmer's son. That he would dream of aspiring to one so much above him in the social scale no one considered for a moment. He was a common-sense, level-headed fellow, and not in the habit of doing foolish things.

So Taffy was watched on all sides, and his doings and sayings canvassed over a much wider area than he had any conception of. But he kept his armour in such good repair that no lance was keen enough to find a joint or flaw.

A few days after his conversation with Ezra Bray he was surprised to see Aunt Jane and her husband driving through the Fore Street of Blakeney in a very respectable pony trap. Ned pulled up at once when his wife nudged him vigorously in the ribs, and stared in the direction of Taffy without seeing him.

"It's Ruth's boy," she said excitedly. "Have you forgotten him?"

"Oh, ay! Beg pardon," Ned said in some con-

fusion as Taffy came forward; "but you be a swell these times."

"Surely the boot is on the other foot," Taffy laughed, and he glanced at the well-groomed pony and then at the newly varnished trap.

"Rather smart, ain't it?" Ned chortled; "but, you see, the missus 'as come into a bit of a fortun'."

Aunt Jane nodded and looked rather red in the face.

"Let me congratulate you," Taffy said, looking a little perplexed.

"No relative," Aunt Jane said shortly, seeing his puzzled expression, "so there's nothing for you."

"Thanks, aunt. It would be a surprise to hear there was a rich relative anywhere."

"You don't want any rich relatives; you have plenty for a young man and a bachelor," she said uneasily. Then, turning to her husband, she snapped, "Hold tight, Ned, while I get out; and you take round the pony and trap to the 'King's Head' and wait for me."

She stepped down out of the trap with considerable alacrity, and Ned drove off with a flourish.

"I wanted to see you," she said hurriedly, "but I don't want to talk before Ned—he's such a fool."

"Oh!"

"It's the truth. But how are you? And how's Smut? Do you ever hear from him?"

"I hear from him very occasionally indeed, if you'll allow me to answer your last question first."

"Oh, take your time over it. I thought perhaps he'd write to you regular. He ain't married yet, I suppose?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"He ain't deservin' of her, in my opinion. My belief is he's going the rig pretty strong."

"What reason have you for saying that?"

"Oh, no reason much," she answered, growing red again; "but he looks that sort."

"I don't think so at all, aunt," he answered a little sharply.

"Oh, you men can't see. Ned's just as blind as a bat."

"But you saw very little of Smut, and I think he was very nice with you."

"Oh, yes, he was nice enough. But his eyes are shifty, exactly like his father's—at least, so I've been told. I wouldn't like to be the woman that married him if I was young."

Taffy laughed, but did not reply. He had his own opinion, but did not choose to give expression to it.

"I'm surprised he wants to marry a girl as 'as no money of her own and is terribly extravagant to boot."

"What do you know about her extravagance?"

"Nothing for certain, of course; but people will talk. It would be a pity if he got living beyond his income and bust up."

"Smut is not likely to do that."

"You think not?"

"I feel sure of it."

"I hope you are right. But such things have happened, haven't they?"

"Well, I suppose they have. But why are you concerned about Smut?"

"Oh, I'm not concerned," and she became as red

as a peony again. "Why should I be concerned? But your mother was very fond of him. And you say he don't write to you much."

"I've not heard from him since February."

"If he were goin' slow and regular don't you think he would write to you oftener?"

"I don't know. Why should he? I'm not related to him, and have no claim upon him whatever."

A long pause followed, and they walked slowly in the direction of the "King's Head."

"You'd be surprised to see Ned and me in a trap?" she said abruptly, and she looked inquiringly up into his face.

"I was rather."

"We got it last month. Ned's given up black-smithing."

"Indeed!"

"We've got a little farm now. Folks has looked down upon me long enough. But they ain't going to do so any longer."

"No?"

"I was always a bit proud; now I've something to be proud on."

"Ah!"

"Ned don't know how much. I only tell him just as much as is good for him to know."

"But he can find out if he wants to, I suppose?"

"No, he can't; not unless I tell him, and I know a trick worth two of that."

Taffy smiled somewhat incredulously, but did not reply. But the idea of Aunt Jane posing as the intellectual superior of anyone tickled him immensely. Ned did not appear to be possessed of overmuch

brains, it was true, and the little he had had not been improved by the over-free use of alcohol; but that he would be defeated in any mental tussle with his wife Taffy did not believe.

"You were fortunate in getting such a legacy," Taffy ventured at length.

"Legacy, did you say? Oh, yes, of course. I was fortunate, wasn't I? But then—oh, well, I earned it, as it were."

* "Then it was not altogether unexpected?"

Aunt Jane flushed again and looked uncomfortable.

"Well," she said slowly, "it was and it wasn't, if you understand. But how are you getting on with your new business? People say as how you are doin' remarkable well."

"Don't take notice of what people say," he answered with a laugh. "I can assure you there is nothing remarkable about it. I've made a start; that is about all that can be honestly said."

"Oh, you're too modest. But what do you think of my new jacket? It's real velveteen. Ruth—that is your mother—never had anything like it."

"I don't think she ever had."

"And yet she considered herself the lady of the family. But there's Ned waiting for me. Doesn't he look a swell?"

"He does indeed. I hope he doesn't feel all that he looks."

"Oh, but he does. He's put on no end of side. He's proud, is Ned, like me. Folks as used to snub him he treats like dirt."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"You needn't be. I believe in giving folks their

due. But good-bye. If you ever hear of anything wrong with Smut, let me know."

Taffy made his way toward Jullef's livery stables, feeling considerably puzzled. He could not help wondering what lay at the back of Aunt Jane's change of fortune. Where did the money come from? How could anyone leave her a legacy without it being generally known? The whole thing was slightly mysterious, to say the least of it.

Then, why her manifest anxiety about Smut? Almost her first question was concerning him, and her last word was on the same subject. What did she know or fear? And even if he did live beyond his income and "bust up," as she expressed it, what concern was it of hers?

Taffy gave up the problem after a while. No doubt he could get to the bottom of it if he felt that way inclined. It was no business of his, however, and he had plenty of other things to occupy his attention.

Mounting Juno he trotted briskly out of town to a distant farm. It was true enough what he told Aunt Jane that in business he had only made a beginning; but it was a beginning that had led already to several other beginnings.

Hitherto his operations had carried him no farther than Bristol. Now the time had come when he would have to face London; and he rather shrank from the encounter. London was so vast, so complex, so difficult to understand—at least, so he had been told. He had a fear of being beaten, outwitted, perhaps lost. Even Bristol got on his nerves. How, then, would he feel when caught in the toils of the mightiest city in the world?

On the other hand, the very chances of battle produced a sense of exhilaration. Besides, Smut was in London, and Sheila Leyland. Smut, of course, he would call upon. Sheila——

But no ! In all probability he would not see her. And on the whole it would doubtless be better if he never looked upon her face again. And yet the thought of going to London and never seeing her was exceedingly bitter. Nearly nine months had passed since they parted at the stile, and not a day had dawned since that he did not live over again some portion of that interview. How his heart ached for a sight of her face was not to be put into words. She kept him company in all his journeys. Her face was the first thing his imagination pictured in the morning, the last thing at night.

He had thought that time might heal, in spite of himself, but he gave time no chance. Directly a film began to form over the wound he stripped it off again. His love grew and intensified with the passing of the days.

His heart throbbed with a strange sense of wonder and expectancy as the train rushed on through Ealing and Acton, and evidences of his near approach to the great city began to make themselves more and more manifest.

Westbourne Park slid past. Alas ! there was no sign of a park—not a tree was visible. The backs of tall houses jutting on to the railway looked sordid and unlovely.

A lurch of the train, a slower grinding of the wheels, a passing glimpse of a stack of milk cans, and then——

A line of porters flung open the doors. "Any more luggage, sir? Keb, sir? Hansom? This way, sir."

Taffy followed the porter with his bag, trying to look unconcerned, but feeling dreadfully bewildered and ill at ease. He had no time to look round him. He was suspicious of the porter in spite of his uniform, for was not London full of sharpers? He climbed into a hansom with a strange sinking of heart. He had never been in a vehicle like it before, and he vowed to himself two minutes later that if ever he got out of the thing alive, nothing should ever tempt him to get into one again.

Once out of the ruck of the station, however, he felt a little more comfortable. Gradually he began to look round him and take stock of things. The bits of green that flashed past him constantly delighted his eyes, and when he came out opposite the Park, he held his breath. In front the rolling sward with glint and flash of water, to the right the massed elms of Kensington Gardens giving an impression of endless distance, to the left the vast flowing tide of life.

He forgot his fears in delighted contemplation of the ever-changing scene. In his wildest dreams he had never pictured anything like it. He had come upon London on its best side, in brilliant sunshine, and during the busiest part of the afternoon. To his left the tall houses had their window-sills gay with flowers; to his right, behind the rails, rolled away wonderful vistas of lovely green; and in front a mighty moving river of which he was an insignificant eddy.

At the Marble Arch he was held up for a few moments, whilst another tide swept across at right

angles. Taffy leaned forward almost spellbound. The intermingling of colour, the easy nonchalance of beautiful ladies and well-dressed gentlemen as they crossed the streets, the flash of motor-cars as they glided past as though skimming on ice, the high-stepping horses with their glossy necks and brilliant trappings, the eager newspaper boys and errand boys on bicycles, the crowded omnibuses rolling gaily by, a grim-faced coster in his donkey-cart, a shabby woman with a child in her arms selling matches, a pair of lovers with their arms round each other's waists unmindful of the crowd—and never for two consecutive moments the same picture.

Taffy felt that if he lived to be a hundred he would never forget that first impression.

On the move again ! Darting round corners into quiet streets, down Brook Street at a swinging pace, across Bond Street just in the nick of time, and into Regent Street to move with the tide once more.

And what a tide ! He was in shopland now. The pavements were crowded—and such a crowd. Had London sent all its women out for holiday ? For every man that elbowed his way along there appeared to be a hundred women. He could hardly get a glimpse of the shops for them ; they swarmed like bees round every window—more eager than bees and gayer.

“Good heavens ! ” he thought, “what must it cost London to dress them all ? ” Such dresses he had never seen before, such laces, such hats ! Did these women earn what they spent, or had they men toiling for them in some other part of this great city ?

Round the curve into Piccadilly Circus and the scene had completely changed. Still a crowd, but a

different kind of crowd. Through Leicester Square, across Charing Cross Road and St. Martin's Lane, and then into dull, quiet streets where life seemed to move slowly once more.

He had come to London because London held Covent Garden. For a moment the scents of the fields struck his nostrils, then the cab pulled up in front of an hotel where he had engaged a room.

He drew a long breath when he found himself alone. Bolting the door, he dropped into an easy chair and tried to sort out his emotions. Through an open window came the endless roar of traffic along the Strand, rising and falling like the sound of the sea on a still night, and from somewhere nearer still came the hum of human voices and the patter of feet on the hard pavements.

He wondered if he were sent adrift to find his way back to Paddington alone if he would ever get there. His strongest impression now was of an endless and baffling tangle of streets with a vast green park in the centre of it.

And somewhere in this great city, among its jostling millions were two people he knew—only two—Smut and Sheila Leyland.

He would be able to find Smut, for he had his address, and when he had got through the business he had come to London to do he would hunt him up.

But Sheila—— He closed his eyes, listening unconsciously to the City's roar.

"I would give my life to see her," he said to himself. "But better not——"

Then it suddenly occurred to him. "Why should I not hunt up Smut to-night? He might show me about a little and help me to get my bearings."

An hour later Taffy climbed into a hansom for the second time. He could have walked the distance in a few minutes had he known his way about and saved the eighteen-pence cabby charged him for a shilling fare. But all distances seem long in a strange place, and he did not grudge cabby the coins.

He felt quite excited when he pulled at the door bell. It would be a pleasure to see his old companion again, even though Smut was robbing him of what he prized most on earth.

CHAPTER XIX

IN LONDON TOWN

"MR. DISCOMBE does not live here now; he left three months ago," was the answer Taffy got when the door was opened in response to his ring.

"Three months ago?" he questioned, with uplifted eyebrows.

"Well, it must be nearly three months ago, if not quite. Possibly you may find him at his club."

"Thanks," and Taffy turned away and began slowly to retrace his steps.

He felt more disappointed than he was prepared to admit to himself. London seemed a terribly lonely place in spite of its crowds. He would get back to his hotel, and read the newspapers, and then go to bed.

He was in no hurry, however. It would not be dark for another hour. So he sauntered along slowly with a keen eye to all that was passing around him. He was quite at sea as to his whereabouts, but that did not trouble him. When he had wandered far enough he could inquire of a policeman or hail a cab.

It was a new experience to be jostled by a crowd, and he rather enjoyed it. Everybody appeared to be eager and alert but himself. He caught himself wondering what they all found to do and where they all lived.

At street crossings he took his time. He was

genuinely afraid of being run over; he was equally afraid of having his pockets picked, so he kept his coat securely buttoned and his eyes "all ways at once."

In time he found himself in Trafalgar Square: He knew it was Trafalgar Square, for he had seen pictures of it many times. Taking up a position near one of the lions, he watched the moving panorama with intense interest, and thrilled at the unfamiliar touch of so much life. No Londoner born can ever know the thrill; to him it is commonplace and everyday. Taffy brought his fresh unspoiled eyes to the vision of life in new aspects and new combinations, and the impression was deep and lasting.

Looking along Whitehall, he caught a glimpse of Westminster's fretted towers, and instantly resolved on a closer view. It required all his courage and skill to negotiate the broad, open space, with its bewildering spasms of traffic, and more than once he held his breath and wondered if he would come out alive; and yet he saw other people crossing the same wide spaces without hurry and without concern. Evidently there was a rule of the road that he did not understand.

He walked rapidly past the Horse Guards, past the Government offices, and then stood stock still when the stately and beautiful Abbey loomed in front of him.

He began to feel among friends now. The loneliness had passed away. He had seen so many pictures of the Abbey, Westminster Hall, the Clock Tower, the Houses of Parliament, that he seemed on familiar ground. He knew that the river must be

flowing down on the other side, and he went forward to see.

Then he turned along the Embankment, and caught his first glimpse of St. Paul's rising high above the housetops. He got an idea of locality now. London began to shape itself before his eyes.

Turning up Northumberland Avenue, he found himself in Trafalgar Square again. But where was Covent Garden? The twilight was deepening rapidly and the electric lights were beginning to flash out in all directions. A sense of awe and mystery stole over him. He was a stranger in a strange place once more. A policeman came to his rescue and gave him all necessary directions, and in ten minutes he was safely back in the hotel again.

He drew a long breath when, by and by, he tumbled into bed. What a long and exciting day it had been! How much he had seen. How much he had felt. Every fibre of his being had been strung up to the highest point of tension. He was glad to stretch himself between the cool sheets, and in five minutes he was fast asleep.

Four days later he turned his face towards home. He had seen London, seen Smut, and seen Sheila Leyland. From a business point of view, London had satisfied him. He had done better than he had even hoped, and he had hoped a great deal.

Smut had both puzzled and pained him. A great change had come over his foster-brother, and a change that was certainly not for the better. He felt it very keenly at their first meeting. He found Smut at his club—a palatial place, with a huge marble hall, massive staircase, and porters in gorgeous livery.

He sent up his name and waited, feeling uncomfortable and out of place.

Outside the door panted a magnificent motor-car, with a foreign-looking chauffeur in charge. Within, gentlemen passed and repassed, or stood in groups talking. Somewhere near him was a tape machine clicking off the latest news; messenger boys in buttons were running up and down stairs calling out the names of members who were wanted. It was all very new to Taffy and a little disconcerting. He had been in London only twenty-four hours, and everything was very strange to him yet.

He carried himself, however, with an air of quiet and easy unconcern. No one would have guessed that he was country born and bred, and that this was his first glimpse of a West-End club.

The messenger boy returned with the announcement that Mr. Discombe would be down in a few minutes. Taffy dropped into a heavy leather-seated chair and waited. He was not the only visitor by a good many, and some of those who waited showed evident signs of impatience.

A quarter of an hour passed, and he began to feel a little irritable. Smut knew that he was waiting. What did he mean by treating him in this way? Nine months had passed since they had last met, and he naturally expected that Smut would come to him at once—come to him with eager welcome in his eyes and pleasure in his voice.

Another ten minutes passed, and then Smut appeared, accompanied by two gentlemen. He looked round him casually and with evident unconcern, and then, seeing Taffy, walked slowly to meet him as though they had parted only the day before.

Taffy felt the blood rush in a hot wave to his face. It was evident enough that he was not wanted. Smut might be friendly enough when he was at Crowdale, but here in London, among his rich acquaintances, he wore a very different face.

Taffy crushed back his pride, however, and showed no sign of resentment. Smut shook his hand limply and declared he was delighted to see him.

"Unfortunately, however, you have caught me at a very busy time," he went on. "I have an important engagement in the City directly, and must be off this minute; but meet me here at one sharp to-morrow, and we will have lunch together. Don't fail me, now—one sharp. Ta, ta," and he was gone.

Taffy, feeling bewildered and chagrined, followed him and his companions to the door, saw them get into the motor-car that had been kept waiting, and whirl away.

For some time he stood on the edge of the pavement looking along the street where they had disappeared. He felt angry and disappointed; and yet he was less sorry for himself than for Smut. The change wrought in him during the last nine months was more than striking—it was painful. His skin had lost its healthy colour, his eyes were heavy and lustreless, his manner was that of a man who had lost grip of things.

Taffy was not any more pleased with his companions. They were both older than Smut, though still young. They wore their silk hats at a rakish angle, and affected a decidedly foppish style and manner. One of them was of distinctly Jewish type, with sallow skin and a hooked nose; he had heavy rings on his fingers and nails that were not very clean.

Taffy's first impulse was to go away from London without attempting to see Smut again, but, on reflection, thought better of it. Smut was his foster-brother, and, more than that, he was about to marry the woman whom he admired more than any other woman on earth.

No; he could not go away without probing things a little. He could not act as though he did not care. He did care. He wanted to be sure that Smut was as worthy of her as in the past, wanted to be satisfied that Sheila had not been trapped into marrying him for his money.

Punctually at one o'clock next day he was at the club. Smut's motor was waiting outside the door. Smut himself was standing in the hall.

"Ah, here you are!" he said, coming eagerly forward. "I'm delighted I can spare you an hour. We'll lunch at the Savoy, if you don't mind. Everybody knows me here—I mean, we can be more alone at the Savoy, you understand. By Jove, but you look well, Taffy! You might have lived in London for a year. When did you come up? Here we are; get in. We'll be round to the Savoy in five minutes or so. Hope you are hungry. This beastly hot weather rather takes it out of me."

Taffy allowed him to rattle on, interjecting a monosyllable only now and then, and all the time trying to discover the nature of the change that had come over him.

If Taffy was impressed by the big white and gold restaurant, he made no sign. He took things as they came and adapted himself to circumstances with wonderful ease.

Smut decided that they would lunch *à la carte*.

"I hate your *table d'hôte* lunches," he remarked to Taffy. "Always give you a lot of things you don't want."

"Now, then, waiter," and he turned to the liveried German behind him.

In a few minutes the lunch was ordered, and then the wine steward was called.

"What would you like to drink, Taffy?" Smut questioned.

"A dry ginger ale."

"Oh, nonsense. You must have some fiz."

"You mean wine?"

"Of course I mean wine."

"Thank you," Taffy said quietly, "but I don't take wine. I really prefer water to anything."

"Oh, you can have water, if you like," Smut said shortly, "but I hope you won't object to my having a glass of something stronger."

Smut had several glasses before coffee was reached, but he had become used to it.

Conversation, on the whole, did not flow easily. Smut talked a great deal, in a nervous and disjointed fashion; he seemed afraid sometimes that Taffy would ask him too many questions, and so introduced into his conversation a good deal that was irrelevant.

Taffy learnt a few things. The first item of news was that Smut had not been back to Oxford since he returned from Crowdale.

"I know I should never have got through my jurisprudence," he explained; "and it was such a beastly grind that I did not see the good of it."

"And you do not intend to take your degree?"

"Not I. What's the good of it? Degrees are cheap as dirt these days."

"But how about the Bar?"

"Oh, I've given that the slip also. You see, Taffy," he went on confidentially, "nothing was to be gained by it. Suppose I were to scrape through my law exams and get called. What then? I really have no head for law. I should just fizzle out like a damp squib."

"I think you underrate your abilities, Smut."

"Oh, no, I don't. I know what I'm fit for. I'm far more at home in the City than in the Law Courts. Oh, don't you make any mistake, Taffy; I know what I'm after, and, what is more, I'm going to get there."

"Then you are doing something?"

"Doing something? Oh, Moses!" and he nearly doubled up with laughter. "I've scarcely an hour to call my own."

"It's scarcely like you to work so hard."

"Oh, but I like it. It's full of excitement. You saw those two men I was with yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And they *are* men, too. Two of the smartest financiers in the City."

"Suppose they should prove too smart for you?"

"My dear fellow, you don't understand. They are not pitted against me; we work together."

For awhile there was silence. Then Taffy brought out the question with a jerk: "And how is Miss Leyland?"

"Splendid. Have some more asparagus?"

"No, thank you."

"And what do you think of London, Taffy?"

"I'm greatly impressed by it. It far exceeds all I had ever dreamed."

"Will you be coming again?"

"Sometimes, perhaps; will depend on how things work out."

"I hear you are fairly getting on your feet. Let me congratulate you."

"Don't be in a hurry," Taffy laughed. "I've only made a beginning."

"Oh, that's your modesty. You'll make a fortune yet."

"I'll be content with an honest living."

Another silence fell. Then Taffy ventured again. "I hear you are to be married soon."

"Yes? Let me help you to a little more chicken?"

"I congratulate you."

"Thank you, old man. You'll have a coffee with your cigar, of course?"

"I think I will."

"Two coffees, waiter. We'll not take any sweets."

Taffy walked across to Covent Garden after lunch feeling anxious and perplexed. Smut went off in his motor Citywards.

During the whole of the afternoon Taffy's thoughts kept straying away to his foster-brother. Smut had become a different man, and yet it was difficult to determine where the difference lay. He had been hospitable, talkative, and apparently friendly, but there had been no communion of spirit. They seemed farther from each other than they had ever been before. Smut had lost something—he hardly knew what. Some virtue or quality had gone out of him, leaving him distinctly poorer. The closely-knit fibre of his moral character had dis-

integrated. He was no longer compact, firm, clean-cut. There was a looseness, a flabbiness about him that was distinctly marked.

And yet this impression was produced not by anything he said or did. His language was quite correct, without hint or suggestion of an unclean mind; no ethical question had been discussed, no word had been dropped to which exception could be taken, and yet he created an atmosphere that was as oppressive as a London fog.

The next day—being his last in London—Taffy gave to sight-seeing. He started early in the morning and finished at midnight.

It was during a stroll up Regent Street to see the shops that he saw Sheila. It was only a hurried glance he got, but it sent his heart into his throat and made him hold his breath for several seconds.

She crossed the pavement with her cousin Peggy from an open landau, and walked straight into a shop without looking to the right or left. Taffy, as it happened, stood quite near her—so near that he could have touched her—but she did not glance in his direction.

She was simply dressed, as usual, but in perfect taste. For one delirious moment Taffy saw no one else. It was as though the pavement had been swept clean for her. She stood alone, beautiful as a dream and as elusive, then the crowd surged across the pavement again.

In recalling her face afterwards, it seemed to him that she looked quite happy. He remembered that she glanced at her cousin and smiled brightly. She walked across the pavement with easy, buoyant step, as though the world went well with her.

Taffy took note of the shop, and concluded that it was some portion of her wedding outfit that she had gone to purchase. It was not surprising that she looked happy, but his own heart smote him with a very bitter pain.

He noticed that the carriage they came in drove away at once. For the best part of an hour he strolled up and down, keeping a sharp look-out in all directions, but the carriage did not come back, neither did Peggy and Sheila reappear. Ultimately he turned away with a sigh. It was useless waiting any longer, particularly as seeing Sheila would not satisfy him in any way, but only add to his misery.

That night he went to see a play that had been greatly talked about in all parts of the country. He was glad of the relief from his own gloomy thoughts. To the stage, as to everything else, he brought a fresh and unspoiled fancy. The scenic effects especially delighted him, the music charmed his ear. When the curtain went down for the last time, and the audience rose to its feet, Taffy pulled out his watch, and was amazed to find that it was nearly midnight. It seemed to him impossible; it scarcely seemed an hour ago since he took his seat. Buttoning his coat tightly round him, he wriggled his way out as fast as he could. It seemed an unearthly hour to be in the streets. In Blakeney everybody would be in bed and asleep.

Out in the open air he drew a deep breath and looked round him. Blakeney might be asleep, but London was wide awake. Piccadilly Circus was a blaze of light and a scene of wild animation. He had some idea of getting a cab and driving to his hotel, but, unfortunately, he did not know how to go about it.

Every taxi and hansom, and even every "growler," was engaged a dozen deep. He gave up the attempt at last; he would have to find his way on foot. But even that was difficult—lights were flashing, motors whizzing, cabbies shouting, people rushing in all directions—moreover, there were so many streets converging that he was in some doubt as to which way he should take. While he waited at a corner his attention was attracted to a young woman, who was trying to guide her companion—a well-dressed man—across the street. His sympathy went out to the young woman in a moment. She was his wife, perhaps his sister?

Then he drew in his breath sharply. She was no wife. That painted face, those bold, alluring eyes told their own tale.

He hardly noticed the man. They were passing far down to his left. The light at length fell on his face.

"God, it's Smut!" he said half aloud. Then, "No, it cannot be."

The crowd had thickened. He tried to elbow his way forward. He craned his neck and stared till his eyes seemed to start out of their sockets. Then came a block. The traffic had been let loose across their path, and there could be no further progress for a minute or two. On the other side of the street he glimpsed the couple again for a moment. The glare of an electric lamp was upon them; then they vanished in the crowd and in the outer darkness.

Taffy gave a groan which he could not suppress, then made his way slowly and sadly in the direction of his hotel.

CHAPTER XX

AN EXPERIMENT

THE journey home did not seem at all long. He had so much to think about that he forgot to notice the passing hours. He paid no heed to the scenery. He lay back in his corner for the most part with his eyes closed as if he were asleep. Yet rarely had his brain been more active. Now that he was away from London and could look back he got a better sense of proportion. Smut stood out in a much clearer light, and Smut was the problem he wanted to solve.

He was prepared to give Smut the benefit of the doubt as far as the midnight scene was concerned. He would not have sworn in any court of law that it was Smut he saw, and yet he was morally certain it was Smut. He did his best to shake his faith in the evidence of his own senses. He told himself again and again that he might be easily mistaken, that in the glare of artificial light nobody could be quite sure. But the conviction remained fixed and unalterable that it was Smut he saw and no one else. And this was the man who was going to take to his bosom as pure a flower of womanhood as the world contained.

To Taffy, with his high and chivalrous notions, the thought was intolerable, almost unthinkable. It made him writhe in impotent horror and anger. Had the parties been anybody else he would have felt it to be an outrage upon the decencies and sanctities of life; but when the man was Smut, his own foster-

brother and companion of his childhood and youth, and the woman was Sheila Leyland—his ideal, the woman *par excellence* above all other women, the woman who had stolen his heart and steeped his life in the atmosphere of her own sweetness and beauty—then the thought was a thousand times worse, it seemed to darken the world with shame.

His first impulse was to do something to prevent the wrong, but a moment's reflection convinced him that he could do nothing, that the matter was out of his reach, that if he attempted to meddle he would only make matters worse, that in any case he was not quite sure, and that it was his duty to give Smut the benefit of the doubt.

But even if he were absolutely sure. What then ? Would it make any difference ?

Fifty cynics or philosophers, as they called themselves, would tell him to-morrow that the thing was inevitable ; that in our unnatural, artificial and over-organised civilisation nothing else could be expected ; that women did not mind ; that there was a tradition among them that every man was a rake at heart and every young man was expected to sow his wild oats, and that it was believed he would make all the better husband in consequence.

He had read enough to be aware that modern literature was full of hints and allusions of the kind ; moreover, if the pictures of life that found their way into the newspapers were any index of the whole, then the cynics were right in their contention.

He discovered that he was growing bitter and cynical himself ; he was angry with the entire scheme of things. The moral order seemed wrong and out of gear. Men were given ideals that they might be

mocked by them, and instincts that ought to lead people right led them wrong.

On the following day he set to work again with redoubled energy. The things that vexed him would have to take their own course. He could neither alter nor hinder. If Sheila chose to give herself to Smut, no more was to be said; and if Smut chose to lower his moral standard, that was his look-out.

He, Taffy, might feel sorry. He did feel sorry. He was sorry for Smut. His youth of promise was tapering out into utter failure. His education was being thrown away, his ideals trampled in the dust. There was no ignoring his moral and intellectual and even physical deterioration. Everything about him indicated retrogression—his manner, his style of living, his contempt for things worthy, his loss of faith in himself.

Taffy recalled his companions—gross, sensual men with cunning eyes. "Clever financiers," Smut called them. What did that mean? Not men who would work for their living, who would run a great business or establish some useful industry. These men had done nothing. They were *financiers*. And Smut hung on to their skirts: what for? And why did they cultivate him?

Smut had plenty, but he evidently wanted more, and he expected to get more; but not by working for it. He hated work. He was too lazy even to pass his examinations. He was going to be a financier. In other words he hoped to get something for nothing—hoped to finger the savings of other people without giving a *quid pro quo*.

Taffy felt sick at heart when he thought of it. Smut was being made a tool of by men less scru-

pulous than himself. Their whole idea of money-making was immoral and dishonest. It was worse than a gamble, and the chances were Smut would be stripped to the bone before he knew what had happened. Yes, he was sorry, but he could do nothing.

He was just as helpless as far as Sheila was concerned. She would have to go her own way. She was a woman now and would follow her own judgment. He might be convinced that Smut was not worthy of her, but he was prejudiced—with the conceit of youth he thought nobody worthy but himself. But even if he were certain that Sheila was making the biggest blunder of her life he could do nothing. Things must go their own way.

Work was the best cure for heartache. He rose early and went to bed late, and between dawn and dark he was never idle.

A little farm about a mile outside Blakeney became vacant, and he took it for the purpose of making experiments. It was beautifully situated, the ground dipping gently toward the south.

In Devonshire he had noticed the apple orchards were shamefully neglected. Nobody thought of pruning the trees or trying to improve the quality of the fruit. The trees were planted and then left to take care of themselves till they grew old and died. If they bore fruit, well; if not—well, so much the worse, it could not be helped.

Taffy got an idea that it could be helped, that what was wanted was a little science as well as industry. Trees needed care and nourishment like other things if they were to do their best. He believed, also, there was not a county in England better adapted to fruit-growing than his own. At any rate,

he would make the experiment. If the rigid and unprogressive conservatism of the district was ever to be broken down somebody would have to lead the way; and if he could lead the way better than anyone else it was his place to do it.

He might fail, of course. But for some reason he did not fear failure. He was not conceited or what is termed self-opinionated, but he had without doubt a strong, steady confidence in himself. As the months had passed away he had grown more and more self-reliant. He had tested his judgment and his strength, and knew pretty well the measure of his ability.

People who did not know Taffy very well shook their heads dubiously. Restal Farm, they said, was not big enough for a man to make a living out of. It was all very well for a man who had private means and wanted a little place to potter round in, keep a few cows and a pony, and grow a little fruit and a few vegetables, but for a man who wanted to farm seriously it was not worth looking at.

Taffy kept his own counsel and went steadily to work. He did not expect for a year or two to make a penny out of it. But he was in no hurry. Youth was on his side, and he could afford to wait.

The previous occupier had been a man of some means and had run the place as a hobby. The house was a good one, not large, but convenient, with a pleasant lawn in front and extensive gardens at the rear. It was not a farmhouse in any sense of the word. It was a pretty, creeper-grown villa with a considerable number of trees about it and standing a good distance back from the road.

Taffy entered into possession with a curious sense

of elation. He knew the place would tax his resources, and he was pretty full-handed already. But risk was the very spice of life—nothing venture, nothing win. There was no certainty that he would succeed, but there were great possibilities. He was entering upon an experiment that might mean not only a great deal to himself but to others also.

He furnished a portion of the house very simply but comfortably—a bedroom and sitting-room for himself, the rest for the man and his wife who were to look after it.

He knew his man well, and had known him for a dozen years—John Pinder by name, an honest, industrious fellow who had intelligence as well as muscle, and who, moreover, had unbounded faith in his young master's ability. John's wife, Honor, was as industrious as he, while their only son, Joseph, was leaving school and would come in handy about the place.

By the end of June Taffy had taken up his residence at Restal and found it a delightful change from his narrow lodgings in town. Each morning before he rode away he gave Pinder instructions as to what should be done, and each evening, on his return, he took off his coat and worked steadily till dark. Sometimes, indeed, he worked by candlelight, when such feeble illumination was sufficient for his purpose.

Necessarily all that he did was preparation. The garden was extended to four times its original size. Cold frames were knocked together and glazed, the like of which had never before been seen in the neighbourhood. A large hen-run was erected on the latest principles, and a number of incubators imported

to supplement the efforts of idle or impatient hens. The greenhouses already in existence were considerably enlarged, and an acre of swamp-land was added to the farm at a peppercorn rental.

Taffy's neighbours talked, as only neighbours in country districts do talk. The grace of reticence had never been given to them. The folly of departing from the experience of untold generations was too great to be passed over in silence. It was such a pity to see a young man wasting his small patrimony in senseless and expensive fads.

Farmer Hendy spoke quite feelingly about it to his neighbour Seddon. Hendy had a sort of fatherly regard for Taffy. He had often spoken to him about getting married, had extolled to him the manifold excellences of his daughter Sally, and was not without hope even yet that "something might come of it." Hence to see Taffy throwing away his money and destroying the chance of his getting married was painful to the honest heart of Farmer Hendy.

"He'll just fool away every blessed penny he's got unless somebody stops him," Hendy said with tears in his eyes.

"I'm none so sure," Seddon replied cautiously. "Seems to me 'e ain't quite a fule."

"Oh, in some things he's clever enough. But have 'ee seen what he's doin' at Restal? It's just Bedlam let loose."

"Didn't know 'twas so bad as that."

"It comes o' larnin' and science an' readin' all sorts o' books. That's the worst o' the extension lectures and the continuation schools, and havin' all these college perfessors meddlin' in things they don't knaw nothin' about. They thinks as how

they can teach us. Ain't we growed up on the soil, an' don't we know all there is to be known 'bout farmin'?"

"I ain't none so sure," Seddon answered dubiously, scratching his head.

"Well, I'm surprised at you, Thomas. But do you know as young Longton says as how he's going to have strawberries ripe for the market in May, that he's going to 'atch chickens without hens sittin' on the eggs, that he's goin' to 'ave new potatoes afore they 'ave 'em in Jersey, that he'll 'ave kidney beans ripe afore they 'ave 'em in France, and that he's going to pay haaf of his rent by growing stuff called sparrow-grass. Think of it, Thomas; did you ever 'ear of such nonsense?"

"Sounds a bit tall, don't it?" Seddon remarked cautiously.

"Tall, Thomas! There ain't no sense in it. Why, will you believe me, he told me last week he's going to grow nothin' in Calves Meadow but daffy-down-dillies!"

"Grow flowers?"

"That's what he told me. He said up to London all the people 'ave flowers on their tables all the year round, and that there was a terrible demand for 'em."

"May be true," Seddon reflected sagely. "Those townspeople do get foolish notions."

"But daffy-down-dillies grow wild, Thomas, and what's the use of wasting good land in growing 'em?"

"Does seem a bit wasteful, don't it?" Thomas replied cautiously. "But then there's no knowing. Young Longton's been up to London, and he seems to know what he's about."

"In some things, yes. There ain't no doubt his business is growin', but he ain't no farmer, Thomas. He said so when he gave up Crowdale, and yet now he pretends he's going to larn us."

"We need stirring up a bit, Hendy; I've said it for years. And, mind you, the chaps as get on are those that strike out something new."

"But there ain't nothin' new in farmin'," Hendy said almost angrily. "There caan't be. You caan't have new fields, or new earth; and a cow is always a cow, and a turmut a turmut. I tell you what, it's a pity, and I'm main sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"Sorry for young Longton. It took his father Peter more'n thirty years to save the bit he did, and now that boy of his is going to throw it all away. I tell 'ee what, Thomas, it hurts me."

"Oh, you keep your sympathy for them as axes for it," Seddon replied shortly. "In my opinion the young man is going to show us a thing or two."

"He's goin' to show us the nearest way to the workhouse," Hendy retorted, and he turned on his heel and marched away.

Seddon felt so much interested that he walked across to Restal that evening to see for himself. He found Taffy in his shirt-sleeves assisting the local mason and carpenter in the extension of his green-houses.

"Evenin'," Seddon said, nodding to Taffy; then he marched slowly round the premises and took stock of everything. He did not ask permission. Why should he? Neighbours, and particularly farmers, did not stand on ceremony of that kind.

After his tour of inspection he came up to Taffy

and remarked sententiously: "Makin' a difference here?"

"Yes."

"Spoilin' it a bit."

"I don't think so."

"Grass and cows always look nice."

"So do orchards and flower beds."

"Spendin' a fair sight o' money, I reckon?"

"A little. One must sow before he reaps."

"Goin' in for something new, Hendy's been a-tellin' me."

"Hendy strongly disapproves, I hear."

"Hendy's old-fashioned. Would 'ee mind tellin' me what your game is?"

"Not in the least. I've no secrets. I'm just experimenting. I want to grow the things that will grow and that there's a sale for. The big towns are clamouring for things we don't grow, or don't grow in sufficient quantities. We are all behind the age. We ought to send millions more eggs to London than we do. We are importing stuff by the ship-load that we might grow ourselves. We attempt to grow wheat in fields that were never meant by Nature to grow wheat, and we neglect to produce the things that would grow in profusion. Besides, I am going to help Nature by using glass. I'll have green peas before April is out, and strawberries in May, and tomatoes in June."

Seddon scratched his head. "Bit presumin' 'pon Nature like, ain't it?" he ventured.

"Not in the least. What Nature asks is to give her a chance."

"Hope as you'll succeed. But I don't reckon as 'ow you'll catch any o' the rest followin' you."

"I'm not asking them to," Taffy laughed, and the interview ended.

Toward the end of August Taffy began to feel restless and apprehensive. Rumour said that Sheila was to be married about harvest time, and harvest was now almost at an end. He was expecting to hear every day that the event had taken place, and yet hoping almost against hope that something would intervene to prevent it.

Since his return from London in May he had done his best to keep both Smut and Sheila out of his thoughts. He had allowed himself no time for brooding. He generally went to bed so tired that he fell asleep at once through sheer weariness, and directly he got up in the morning he went to his work. On Sundays he often went three times to church or chapel—not that he always felt in a devotional frame of mind or was particularly anxious to listen to this preacher or that, but simply from a desire to save himself from moping.

But when the fields were yellow again to harvest, and the click and ring of the reaper broke once more upon the drowsy silence of the countryside, Taffy's thoughts got out of hand, and he became moody and restless and irritable.

Sheila ought to know, he told himself. Her clear eyes ought to see through the man who was wooing her. His deterioration ought to be as patent to her as to him, her womanly instincts should be a sufficient guide.

August came to an end, and the sweet stillness of September lay upon the land. Taffy's hope flickered a little more brightly every day. There was still no

news from London. Perhaps after all—— He drew deep breaths as he rode slowly across the country. If Sheila refused to marry Smut—refused to be tempted by gold—what dreams he might cherish still !

The darkness fell suddenly. He found one evening on his return a brief letter from Smut, which had been posted in Paris, announcing that he had been married two days previously.

CHAPTER XXI

SMUT'S WOOING

SMUT showed more continuity of purpose in the wooing of Sheila than in any other affair of his life. Had anyone else received his advances in just the same way, he would have given up the quest in despair; but Sheila was so beautiful, so frank, and yet so gracious that he declared to himself that there was nothing else on earth he desired half so much.

He loved her, and yet he was afraid of her. Her very transparency seemed to throw into relief his own deceit; her guilelessness made him painfully conscious of his own hypocrisy.

He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, and yet something held his speech in check; and for the life of him he could not tell what it was. She never shunned him, never betrayed any self-consciousness, was always gracious and friendly and delightfully frank; but directly he got up to saying the tender things he wanted to say, it was as though a sudden frost nipped all the flowers of his rhetoric and eloquence.

His first and second visits to Ardwell Gardens came to nothing. He was introduced to Sheila's father and stepmother and to the younger Leylands, of whom there were four. He was made quite welcome, for the sake of Sir John Merton, who had written to Mr. Leyland a friendly note about him,

and he was asked to drop in again at any time when he had an hour or two to spare.

Nothing could have been kinder than Sheila's treatment of him. Perhaps in that fact lay the kernel of his difficulty—she was too kind, too unsuspecting. If she had shown the least trace of self-consciousness he would have been much better pleased; but she might not have had the remotest suspicion as to why he called, she appeared so perfectly natural and at ease.

Smut could not help wondering whether this was a pose or whether it was her nature to be kind to everybody. He told himself that it was next to impossible that she should be quite ignorant of his intentions. Sir John and Peggy understood quite well, and Peggy was not the sort of person to keep secrets of that kind to herself, even if Sir John were silent on the subject. Moreover, in Milor their engagement was looked upon as a settled thing, and the talk of the village would be almost certain to reach her ears in some form or other.

It was, no doubt, true enough that he had never declared himself; but she was a woman, and a woman always knew when a man was in love with her. If he had been silent hitherto, it was not his fault. It was she who had kept him at a distance and prevented him from saying what was in his heart to say.

When he left Ardwell Gardens the second time without having got any nearer the object of his visit he felt not only angry but perplexed. Sheila had given him every opportunity of making love to her if he had chosen to take advantage of it; but, like the fool he was, he talked of any and every subject rather than the one that was uppermost in his mind.

Why was it? Why was he always so dumb in her presence? Why did her clear, liquid eyes, looking frankly into his, make him feel so uncomfortable? It was his inability to answer these questions satisfactorily that made him feel so angry and filled him with so much unrest.

He rather plumed himself at this time on the possession of some very good and healthy desires. He had not slipped so far but that he still admired goodness and integrity; and though he had failed in the great crisis of his life, and had strayed more than once into the commoner forms of vice, he still saw no reason why he should not live an ordinarily respectable life, provided he received encouragement and help from those around him.

And, of all the people who could help him, Sheila stood first and foremost. He was quite sure of that. He told himself that she could make a man of him, that the white fire of her purity would burn up his grossness, that her truthfulness and honesty would counterbalance his deceit, and that in the healing warmth of her presence and companionship the better side of his nature would develop and grow.

All this looked very fine to him as he contemplated the picture from time to time. He was no abandoned sinner. He was, indeed, a very respectable man, who had only just fallen short of heroism. Indeed, he would have been a hero if the sacrifice had not been so great. He had lied, no doubt; but, then, all men lied to a greater or less extent. He was living on property that was not his own. But that was not his fault, and he was bound to protect the memory of his dead father and mother.

His conscience rarely troubled him now. He had

found great comfort in the doctrine of inevitability. Things could not be shifted out of the eternal order, and a man who tried to shift them was a fool.

What troubled him most was Aunt Jane. She was bleeding him for all she was worth, and the more he gave her the more her needs grew. He protested and vowed and threatened, but she took no notice.

"Please send me ten or twenty pounds by return," she would write—rarely anything more. She never threatened now, never used any hard words; she simply asked for what she wanted, and she got it.

Aunt Jane was a problem that kept him awake at nights and often filled his days with foreboding. Her shadow lay across his path at every turn; her letters were a torture to him; her steady persistency got on his nerves. He was afraid of her. He lacked the courage to dare her to do her worst. How to safeguard effectually the future was now one of the most pressing questions he had to face. He wanted to insure himself, if possible, against accidents, to have sufficient to live on in case the secret of his birth should be discovered.

This could be done in two ways. First, by marrying a rich wife, and, second, by trading with Discombe's money and doubling or trebling it.

He had made careful inquiries into Sheila Leyland's financial position, and discovered that she was by no means penniless. All her mother's property had come to her. How much it amounted to he had not been able to find out; but the Mertons had been rich people for generations. Doubtless Sir John had come in for the bulk of the property, but it was hardly likely that his sister (Sheila's mother) would be left without ample dowry.

Sheila, therefore, was doubly to be desired. Not only did he love her, but she had the wherewithal to pay the way in case of accidents.

On his third visit to Ardwell Gardens he was delighted to find Sheila at home alone. She received him quite graciously, as was her habit; but he was disappointed to find that no trace of a blush stole over her cheeks, and that her manner was as matter-of-fact as if he had been a curate who had called to talk about a bazaar.

"I suppose you are still struggling with Roman law—or is it English jurisprudence?" she questioned gaily. "You must feel awfully bored at times." And she indicated an easy chair near the open window.

"It is frightfully boring," he said, dropping languidly into the chair.

"But you are getting on well with your studies, I hope?"

"Oh, middling. It is not easy to read in London, you know; there are so many distractions."

"But I thought you were living a sort of hermit's life?"

"Well, I am, in a way," he said, bringing out the words awkwardly. He wished she would not ask him questions that compelled him to tell lies.

"And do you go back to Oxford next week?"

"Is it next week term begins?" he questioned uneasily. "Really, I have been forgetting. How the time slips away!"

"I am surprised that you should forget," she said, with a laugh.

"The truth is I have been so frightfully rushed," he said lamely, staring out of the window. "I suppose you have been having quite a quiet time?"

"Very quiet. And have you heard from your foster-brother lately?"

"What—Taffy? Oh, yes. I heard a day or two ago. He has given up the farm and gone into diggings at Blakeney."

"Really?"

"I confess I don't understand it," he went on, glad to get away from the subject of his own affairs. "The farm wasn't bad, by all accounts; anyhow, his father made a living out of it for a good many years."

"And—and—do you know what Mr. Longton intends doing?"

"Haven't the remotest idea. Very likely he doesn't intend to do anything. Will try being a gentleman, perhaps, so long as his money lasts."

"Is he—is he that sort, do you think?" She turned away her head as she spoke, so that he failed to get a glimpse of her eyes.

"One never knows," he said a little loftily. "There's always a risk when people who have been poor all their lives come in for a bit of money."

"Then you haven't much confidence in him—that is, in his judgment?"

He laughed uneasily. It was strange how she always managed to get the conversation into channels that he did not like. He wished she would talk about herself. Moreover, her interest in Taffy annoyed him. She seemed to think him something out of the common. It might be wise to lower her estimate of him a little.

"Taffy has disappointed me in several things," he said, with a bored expression.

"Indeed!"

"Not that I would be hard on him, of course. It

is hardly to be expected that one brought up as he has been will be—well, quite a gentleman.”

“Is not gentlemanliness rather a matter of spirit than of upbringing?”

He flushed hotly for a moment, and glanced uneasily in her direction, but she did not look at him.

“I do not think you quite understand me,” he said with some hesitation. “I used the word in its deeper as well as in its more general sense. But let us not talk about Taffy; let us talk about something more pleasant.”

“You regard Mr. Longton as an unpleasant subject, do you?” she questioned, with a laugh.

“Oh, well, not in every connection, of course; but, really and truly, I would rather not discuss him with you.”

“I always had a very high opinion of him. He seemed to me far above the commonplace.”

“To you he would, no doubt; that is, considering everything. But then, you saw very little of him. He belongs—well, not to your world at all.”

“Indeed! What is there so distinctive about my world?”

He laughed uneasily before replying, and tried to get a look at her eyes. “Oh, come,” he said, “you know very well what I mean; but why pursue the subject farther?”

“Don’t you think it interesting?”

“I don’t a bit. I hope I am not a snob; but nobody can quite ignore these social distinctions. Neither can we be blind to the effect of environment on character. You know the old proverb, ‘Live with wolves and you will learn to bark.’”

"But Mr. Longton has never lived with wolves."

Smut flushed again, and began to feel extremely uncomfortable. This was the third time he had called, and each time he had meant, if not actually to propose to her, at least to pave the way to a proposal; and each time she had managed somehow or other to keep him not merely at arm's length, but leagues away from the subject that was uppermost in his thoughts. And, even worse than that, each time she had so entangled him in their conversation that he had been compelled to add untruth to untruth in order to preserve any kind of reputation whatever.

It was very amazing, for he believed himself to be madly in love with her. She was so beautiful, so gracious, so winning, that if only circumstances would let him he believed he could be a good man for her sake. If any power in the world could redeem him and make a man of him, he believed that power was lodged in her hands. The sight of her face, the sound of her voice, always awoke into life his early dreams and ideals and ambitions. He longed for her as a drowning man might long for a lifebuoy.

Before he could reply, some friends of Sheila were announced, and the hoped-for opportunity passed. As he made his way homeward he reflected seriously on his position. He had left Sheila with the impression that he was going back to Oxford the following week. He did not tell her so in as many words, but he left her to infer it.

What was he to do, therefore? He felt that his lack of candour and honesty had got him into a hole. She would despise him if she knew he had deliberately shirked his final. She would despise him still more

if she discovered he had been untruthful and insincere.

He got out of the difficulty by keeping away from Ardwell Gardens for nearly a month, and then pretending that he had been ill; and certainly he looked ill enough to be in bed. The persistent blackmailing of Aunt Jane, the uncertainty of the future, the constant fear that the truth would leak out, made him seek forgetfulness in ways that would have shocked him at an earlier time. He was losing ground steadily, and he knew it, with the result that a new fear possessed him—the fear that Sheila might discover it.

Sheila, however, did not appear to see. She was full of sympathy when he called; commiserated with him on his disappointment; and urged him in quite a friendly way not to work too hard.

He felt more hopeful when he left that evening than he had done for a long time past. Sympathy was often the twin sister of love. And he felt sure that if he could only retain Sheila's sympathetic regard, the rest would quite naturally and easily follow.

So the weeks slipped away and grew into months, and all the while Smut played a waiting game. He became a sort of friend of the family. He got on very intimate terms with Mr. Leyland, took Mrs. Leyland and the children for drives in his motor car, and made himself agreeable to all and sundry.

Mr. Leyland understood what he was after, and approved. Mrs. Leyland was enthusiastic in his favour. The children liked him immensely; he gave them such nice presents. The friends of the family regarded an engagement between him and Sheila as a settled thing.

Sheila kept her own counsel. Of course, she saw

clearly enough how things were drifting; had seen for months, and had done her best—and successfully—to ward off a definite proposal. She was in no hurry to be engaged, and was quite obdurate when her friends told her that she might be throwing away a good chance.

At Milor Hall the engagement was looked upon as a settled thing, and when Sir John and Peggy left for London, the latter told the housekeeper that it was as good as settled that her Cousin Sheila would be married before their return in the autumn.

It was early in April when Smut took the final plunge. He felt that he had waited long enough. Moreover, all the omens seemed favourable. He had established his position with the Leylands, and had won the approval of their friends. So one evening he fortified himself for the ordeal, and with much show of feeling laid his heart and fortune at Sheila's feet.

CHAPTER XXII

A NIGHT OF STORM

It was late in October when Sir John and Peggy returned to Milor Hall. Taffy heard the news with a pang. He would have forgotten the place if he could, with all its associations. He had hoped that when Sheila was actually married he would be able to put her out of his thoughts, and that the wound in his heart would heal.

In this, however, he was disappointed. The days slipped away, but they brought him no comfort; indeed, the sense of loss seemed to grow and deepen. It is true he no longer thought of her as he had been in the habit of doing. He no longer wanted to see her; no longer hungered for her smile. She was as one dead and buried, and no one wishes to disturb the grave of those whom they have loved; but the bitter ache, the pain of hopelessness were hard to bear.

He remembered her as she had been—the fair hopes and dreams he had woven round her name. The wife of Smut was not the woman he had loved. His Sheila had vanished into the infinite ether; he would never see her again, never hear the music of her voice. Smut's wife was another person. It was impossible to think of the two being the same.

He went about his work with all his old energy and enthusiasm, and no one guessed that the dream of his life had gone out in darkness. If anything, he was a little more daring and speculative than he

had been before. He told himself that it did not matter whether he failed or succeeded. He had no one but himself to think of. The vague and far-away hope that had glinted like a golden thread in the tapestry of his life had been taken out of the loom. Sheila no longer beckoned to future bliss.

The difference that that made he did not fully realise himself. He planned and wrought and speculated with no thought or care for what lay ahead. The excitements of the chase were everything; the spoils were not worth considering. He had lived for the future—a future in which Sheila was the light thereof. Now he lived for the present—for the mere pleasure of enterprise and hard work.

He was bitterly conscious that something had gone out of his life, and that that something had made life worth the living. A man who has nothing to which he can look forward with bright and eager anticipation is surely of all men most miserable.

How much the hope of winning Sheila had been to him he hardly realised even yet. He told himself again and again that he never had cherished any such foolish illusion; that he had always seen the absolute impossibility of any such alliance; that what had taken place was what he had always known was bound to take place sooner or later, with much more to the same effect. But hope had lived in his heart all the time. It had cheered him and inspired him beyond anything he knew; and now that it had gone out in darkness, he was like a traveller in a strange country overtaken by night. With the setting of the sun all the beauty had faded from the landscape.

He was resting one evening at "The Milor Arms" while his mare was being shod. It had been a gusty

day with occasional gleams of sunshine, but as evening had come on the clouds had gathered in density, while the wind continued to increase in force.

Taffy was glad of the rest, for he had ridden far during the day, and the smell of Mrs. Taplin's ham and eggs was grateful and appetising.

"Everything has its compensations," he reflected as he poured himself out a cup of tea. "If the mare had not cast her shoe I should have gone on enduring the pangs of hunger for another hour."

He had the little parlour all to himself. A cheerful fire crackled in the grate, and flung a grateful warmth into the room. Outside, what remained of the daylight was fading rapidly. Heavy masses of cloud were being driven swiftly across the sky, and there was every evidence of a night of storm.

Taffy, however, did not trouble himself about the weather. On the whole, he liked being out of doors on a stormy night. There was something exhilarating in fighting the elements. It appealed to the savage instinct in him, and made him feel akin to nature.

Every now and then there was a sudden grumble in the chimney, and the windows shook and creaked as though all the air had been sucked out of the room.

Taffy glanced up occasionally and smiled, but he was too interested in the ham and eggs to concern himself about the vagaries of the wind. Mrs. Taplin came in at length, and lighted the lamp and drew the blinds.

"The blacksmith has sent across to say your mare won't be ready for another half-hour," she remarked casually.

"Oh! How is that?" he inquired indifferently.

"A second shoe was nearly off—at least, so he says—and he hopes you won't mind waiting."

"Not in the least. I am very comfortable here; and I could do nothing if I were at home."

"People are sayin' as how you work too hard," Mrs. Taplin remarked, and left the room.

Taffy rose from the table at length, and began to charge his brier. The grumblings of the wind in the chimney had increased to a roar, whilst every now and then there was a splash of rain against the window-pane.

"I fear it is going to be a bad night," he reflected. "If Ned does not bring round my horse soon I shall get a soaking."

He manifested, however, no sign of impatience. Dropping into an easy chair, he settled himself comfortably, and began to pull at his pipe.

"I wonder if I am working too hard," he reflected, and a careworn look stole over his handsome face. He certainly felt tired, but that was nothing. A man might be tired who did nothing at all.

He heaved a sigh at length. Why should a man toil and strive when he had no one to strive for? If he had wife and children—or even the hope of wife and children—it would be different; but he had neither, and was quite sure that no woman would ever again quicken his dead heart into life.

Suddenly the door opened, and the landlord came hurriedly into the room.

"You've seen nothing of the squire's niece in your travels this afternoon?" he questioned anxiously.

"The squire's niece?" he questioned, with a puzzled expression. "No. I was not aware——"

"She went out alone for a walk this afternoon, it seems," the landlord went on hurriedly. "She was expected back to tea two hours ago, and she hasn't turned up yet. And as——"

"But I was not aware the squire had a niece," Taffy interrupted; "that is, except——"

"It's the same, I expect," the landlord interrupted. "You see, they only returned to the Hall yesterday."

"Scarcely the same," Taffy remarked with a twitching of the lips. "A newly-married woman would hardly be likely to leave her husband so soon."

"Well, as to that there's no saying," Taplin remarked, scratching his head. "I suppose the girl has got wed, but we've heard nothing about it here in Milor. Sir John and Miss Peggy in writing to the servants have never said a word about it——"

"But Smut wrote to me himself when on his honeymoon," Taffy interrupted.

"Then that settles it," the landlord continued. "But, as I was saying, the squire and Miss Peggy have been very close——"

"But they have never been in the habit of talking to their servants; at least, so I have been given to understand——"

"Not as a general rule, perhaps. But Miss Peggy is a woman, and women, as you know, find it mighty difficult to keep things to themselves; and if they've nobody of their own set to talk to, they'll sometimes talk to their maids."

"When their maids are with them. But Miss Peggy has been in London."

"Yes, exactly. But all the same, the servants at the Hall expected to hear all about the wedding, and

were mightily surprised last night when the young lady turned up again——”

“You’re sure it’s the same young lady?” Taffy questioned, trying hard to suppress his excitement.

“Well, I’m not going to swear to it,” Taplin answered slowly; “but I’ve taken it for granted it was the same. The squire’s only one niece that I know of. But mother’ll know for certain.” And Taplin went and opened the door and called to his wife.

Mrs. Taplin came at once, but she was able to add nothing to what her husband had stated. News had reached the village from the Hall that the squire’s niece had returned with them from London, and they had assumed naturally that it was Sheila; it might, of course, be somebody else.

Taffy had risen to his feet, and was holding his pipe between his fingers. He felt intensely excited. If Smut’s wife had returned to the Hall, he did not want to see her. If she had got lost, he did not wish to join in the search. He wanted to remember her as he remembered the dead. To see her again in the flesh would be a thousand times worse than seeing a ghost. While she kept out of sight he could still cherish his ideal—could think of her and dream of her as she had been. It was almost the last illusion he had left, and he would not have it destroyed for the world.

While he stood thus, staring at the open door, voices floated across from the public-house kitchen.

“If nobody knows which way the maid’s gone, what’s the use of going to look for her?” said one.

“Besides, it’s as dark as Davy Jones’s locker,”

said a second; "and the wind's roaring like Beelzebub himself."

"But we're bound to do something," said a third. "She's a good sort, as everybody knows."

"But what's she doin' down 'ere without her husband? That's what I want to know," retorted the second speaker.

"That's no business of ours," was the reply. "If she's met with a haccident or got lost somebody ought to go and look for her."

"Is anybody sartin that the weddin's took place yet?" asked the first speaker.

Taffy did not wait for the conversation to be continued. Rushing across to the kitchen, he faced the three men.

"Are you certain that it is Miss Sheila Leyland—that was—who has got lost?" he demanded.

"Quite sure," they retorted.

"You have seen her?"

"No; but Blake, the coachman, knows."

"Is he here?"

"He was five minutes ago."

"And what did he say?"

"As 'ow the squire was needlessly worritin'. 'Miss Sheila,' he says, 'knows the country better'n many folks as was born 'ere, and if she's missed her way she'll find it again sooner or later.'"

"That may or may not be true," he answered. "Anyhow, I, for one, am going to look for her," and he turned on his heel and left the room.

Five minutes later he was battling with the storm. He had borrowed a cloth cap and a stout stick from the landlord, and had set out alone. He had no wish for company. He knew Sheila's haunts, and would

make straight for them without discussing plans with anybody. A dozen questions were surging in his brain, a dozen emotions struggling in his heart. What he hoped or feared he did not know. He was too intensely excited to think clearly. For the moment everything was chaos, nothing was certain; but out of the chaos something might grow. He might dream again, if only for an hour. Hope was hammering at his heart and flashing its fitful light into his eyes.

He scarcely heard the roaring of the wind in the tall elms that grew outside the village. The storm within made him heedless of the storm without. Beyond the belt of trees that protected the Hall from vulgar gaze the wind caught him with all its force and almost took his breath away. For a moment he halted and buttoned his coat tightly round his throat; then he struck out across the fields towards the downs. There was no path, but that did not matter; he knew every field and hedge and stream and copse in the neighbourhood. During the years of his boyhood and youth he had explored every rood, almost every foot, of the country for miles around.

As much as possible he kept in the lee of the hedges, and when in the open he scudded before the wind, till by and by he reached the stile at the foot of the downs where he had had his last conversation with Sheila.

It was a sheltered corner, protected by tall quick-thorn hedges. For a moment or two he rested against the stile and shut his eyes. He did not try to put away the vision of Sheila—she stood before him again as she stood that summer afternoon, clad all in white. The wind soughed and hissed through the

thorns, but he heard only the music of her voice; the night was black with cloud and storm, but for the moment he saw only the sunshine and the green hedgerows and the waving cornfields.

What if she had never married Smut? What if there had been some mistake? It might be madness to dream again—to hope again—but he could not help it. Every nerve was thrilling with a new-born excitement.

He did not remain long in the sheltered corner. Sheila had got lost. And, whether she was still Sheila Leyland, or whether she was the wife of Smut, his duty was clear. He must search for her and, if possible, find her.

He had assumed from the first moment that she had climbed to the top of the downs. It had been a dry, bracing afternoon, with gleams of bright sunshine. The weather-beaten tors would loom near and inviting. She would enjoy battling with the wind, enjoy the vigorous exercise, after a year of London life. It would be a pleasure to her to traverse the familiar paths and sniff the pungent odours of the wild thyme and betony, to listen to the hissing of the wind in the gorse and heather—so he had reasoned with himself. If she had confined herself to a ramble nearer home she would not have got lost, unless she had met with some serious accident and was unable to call for help. But that did not seem at all likely. She had gone for a long ramble, or she would have returned in time for tea. Doubtless she had gone farther than she had intended—the wide moorland would be tempting on such a day. The serrated tors would arouse her curiosity, her love of nature would make her forgetful of the flight of time. When she

began to retrace her steps she would discover that she had the wind in her teeth. It rose rapidly until it blew a gale. Possibly she would seek shelter from the blinding showers of rain in the shadow of the tors. It was not unlikely she had become exhausted in her endeavours to fight her way against the raging wind. Then darkness had fallen.

She might cry for help until she was hoarse, and no one would hear her on that hurricane-swept height. She might struggle with the elements until she had no strength left.

He hoped, however, that, realising the futility of pitting her strength against a hurricane, she would remain in the shelter of some protecting rock. Deadman's Rock, if she were fortunate enough to reach it, would shelter her completely, not only from the wind but the rain; there were huge clefts and fissures in which a horse could hide. She would suffer from cold and hunger, no doubt, but that would be the worst.

It was not difficult, with the wind at his back, to climb the steep hillside. Now and then he found himself on all fours, with his face in the heather, but he was soon on his feet again. It was too dark to trace any path, so he had to make a bee-line in the direction of Deadman's Rock. Turning once to look back, he saw moving lights on the plain below. Hither and thither they gleamed fitfully for a moment, and then disappeared, to twinkle in some other place a little later.

"The village has turned out at last," he said to himself. "But she is not down there; there is no possibility of her getting lost so near home."

And then the old baffling, tantalising question

tore at his brain again. "Why had she come to Milor Hall? If she had married Smut, why had she left him so soon? Had she discovered her mistake, or——?"

But the hope that she was still free was too good to be cherished. Had not Smut written to him to say he was married? Surely that was evidence enough, and he was a fool to let impossible dreams torture him again.

He turned his face once more to the hill and struggled on. The wind battered him and thumped him until he felt bruised from head to foot. The heather was wet and slippery; the roots of the furze bushes tripped him up again and again; the rain came down in fitful splashes that stung his neck and ears like whiplash.

The higher he climbed the slower his pace became. His strength was slowly but surely giving out. The pitiless wind seemed at times to suck all the breath out of his body. When he fell forward on his face, as he constantly did, he lay sometimes for several minutes before attempting to get up again.

Yet the thought of Sheila in distress was like fire in his veins. She was no longer as one dead to him. She was alive. She had come out of the grave in which, in imagination, he had seen her buried. She was Sheila Leyland still, pure and spotless and beautiful as when she first touched his heart to love and adoration.

He might be disillusioned when he found her. That he must risk. For a brief moment the hope was his. The old love and passion and longing surged through his heart with tenfold intensity. He was ready to die for one more sight of her face.

At length he saw dimly through the darkness the frowning walls of Deadman's Rock, and he commenced to crawl toward it on his hands and knees. To walk erect was an impossibility. The storm in the valley was a hurricane on the hill. It seemed as if it would pull his very hair out by the roots. Again and again he had to lie flat on his face and wait for a momentary lull.

Never in all his life had he known such an experience. He made his way by inches. It was a life and death struggle in which death seemed to have the better chance.

He crept round to the lee side of the rock at length, gripping the roots of heather and gorse until there was scarcely any skin left on the ends of his fingers. For several moments he lay on the ground and gasped; then he rose slowly to his knees and looked round him. The air was still and, by contrast, warm; the noise of the tempest seemed far away.

There was, however, no sign of life. The clefts and hollows showed a deeper blackness. There was no sound save the far-off hurtling of the storm.

He called, and his voice sounded strangely loud and distinct.

"Miss Leyland! Sheila! Sheila!" But there was no reply. He searched the hollows and fissures, but they were quite empty. Then, with a swift revulsion of feeling, he threw himself on the ground with a groan. He had spent his time and strength in vain.

CHAPTER XXIII

TOLD IN THE FIRELIGHT

TAFFY'S disappointment was so great that for awhile he seemed incapable of further thought or effort. He had tried his best and failed, and that was the end. He could do nothing but wait until the storm had abated, and then turn his face once more towards Milor. Meanwhile he hoped that the villagers had been more successful than he, and that Sheila was now safe and sound in her uncle's house.

Perhaps, on the whole, things had turned out for the best. There was compensation in everything. To see Sheila again might be tearing open a wound that was beginning to heal; besides, if she were Smut's wife, he had no right to think of her at all. As Smut's wife he never wanted to look into her eyes again. He wanted to remember her as she had been, and to go down to the grave so remembering.

The wind lulled a little, and there came faintly upon it a sound that he had not heard before. Instantly every faculty was alert once more. What the sound was he could not tell. It was too faint and indistinct. It might, of course, be the wind whistling round the tors. It was, no doubt, the sound of the wind wailing through their cracks and crannies that led to the belief that they were haunted.

He shut his eyes and remained perfectly still with his hands behind his ears. For awhile he could

hear nothing but the hurtling of the storm ; then came a lull again, and with it the same faint call.

"That is not the sound of the wind," he said to himself excitedly. "It must be her voice, for there can be no other living thing on the downs to-night."

But from what direction the sound came he had no idea. The wind made mock of everything on such a night.

For a moment longer he stood listening ; then, putting his hands to his mouth, he called : "Ahoy ! Ahoy ! Ahoy !" But it seemed to him as if he cried into a raging furnace. His voice was swallowed up, beaten to the ground, and lost. And yet a moment later came an answering call, but so faint, so torn into shreds, that he could distinguish no word or syllable. But that it was a human voice he no longer doubted.

He crept out again from the shelter of the rock, and the wind caught him and threw him on his face. Was there ever such a storm, he wondered ? For several moments he lay on the heather half stunned ; then he rose slowly to his hands and knees, and called once more : "Ahoy ! Ahoy !"

And through the clamour of the hissing storm came the same faint call.

Overhead the clouds were breaking asunder, and here and there a star gleamed in the unfathomable deeps of space. Several massive tors loomed dimly in the distance, the nearest being several hundred yards away. Waiting for a momentary lull, he sprang to his feet and began to run. The wind caught him in the back and sent him flying before it. It seemed to him that his feet scarcely touched the ground. Over hillocks of gorse and heather he sped

like a leaf in the blast. Then once more he tripped and fell forward, but he was near the tor at which he had aimed, and for the rest of the distance he crept on his hands and knees.

What a delicious relief it was to get into the shelter of that giant pile of rocks! It was as though the storm had suddenly died into silence. Sitting up, he looked hurriedly round him, then called again: "Ahoy!"

In a moment a woman's figure seemed to grow out of the rock almost within reach of his hand.

"Thank Heaven I have found you!" he gasped. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no, I'm all right—only stormbound. It is good of you to come in search of me."

"You know who I am?"

"I should know your voice among a thousand. How did you know I was here?"

"I did not know; I only guessed."

"But you live at Blakeney?"

"I was resting at 'The Milor Arms' while my mare was being shod. I think it was Sir John's coachman who brought the news. They have organised a search at Milor. I saw the lights of their lanterns when I was halfway up the hill."

"And you have come alone?"

"Yes."

For a moment or two there was silence. Taffy could feel his heart beating in his throat. His nerves were thrilling to the verge of pain. He did not attempt to draw any nearer; he scarcely looked at her. He was fighting the old battle over again, and wondering what the result would be.

"I am so sorry to have given all this trouble,"

she said at length. "I had no idea of being caught in such a storm. Poor uncle will be terribly distressed."

"And not only your uncle."

"Oh, I don't think Peggy will worry; she is not of the foreboding sort, and will conclude I have found shelter somewhere. Father and mother, of course, will know nothing about it."

"And—and—your husband?" He blurted out the question awkwardly and suddenly.

"My what?"

"You are married, are you not?" he questioned timidly.

"Married? What do you mean? Who said I was married?"

"I really don't know," he said, feeling very confused. "We all took it for granted that you were."

"But why?"

"Well, you see, it was rumoured that you and Mr. Discombe were engaged, or about to be engaged, before you went away last year. Then it was said that Sir John and Miss Peggy would not return until after your wedding. Then, some time ago, I had a short letter from Smut from Paris to say he was on his honeymoon."

"And you concluded that I was the bride?" and she laughed a little harshly.

"I did indeed."

"And you were prepared to congratulate me?"

"No, I was not."

There was silence again. Neither could see the other's face. Taffy's heart was leaping in such a tumult of joy and hope that he forgot where he was. To right and left the wind was hissing in the

heather like a myriad angry serpents. There was scarcely a square inch of his body that did not smart or ache. He was exhausted with his long battle with the storm, and yet he was conscious of neither pain nor weakness. One glad thought obliterated everything else—Sheila was not the wife of Smut.

How long the silence lasted he did not know, but he was the first to break it.

"You must be very cold?" he questioned.

She laughed timidly and answered: "I am almost frozen. I wonder how many hours I have been crouching here?"

"I wish I could get you out of it," he ventured; "but it is quite impossible till the gale subsides a little."

"It seems to be getting worse all the time."

"I think not. Anyhow, we must make the best of it."

She laughed again. "It is a curious situation," she answered. "I wish I had not been so foolish, but I did pine for the fresh air of the moors and the smell of the heather."

"Then my guess was right. I understood how you would feel, and so made straight for the downs. For the same reason I put what remained of Mrs. Taplin's ham rashers between two slices of bread and brought them with me——"

"Oh, how lovely of you!" she interrupted impulsively. "You are a perfect angel," and she reached her hands eagerly toward him, and in so doing their hands met.

He clasped hers instinctively and held them fast in his strong, warm palms.

"How cold you are!" he said, and his voice shook with emotion.

"And hungry," she laughed timidly; but she did not attempt to draw her hands away. He could almost feel her breath upon his cheek. Her voice spoke close to his ear. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her to his heart, but dared not. She still seemed infinitely beyond his reach—a creature to be worshipped rather than won.

"I am very thoughtless," he said, unclasping his hands slowly. "I hope my poor sandwich has not got wet," and he dived his hand into an inner pocket and fetched out the parcel.

"It will be delicious even if it is soaked," she answered, and she drew back a step and sat down on a ledge of rock and began to unwrap the paper.

The rain by this time had given over, and the sky was clearing rapidly, but the wind was raging as fiercely as ever.

Taffy began to fear that they would have to spend the night where they were. Not that he minded for himself, but for her the consequences might be serious. Already she was chilled to the bone, and the night was growing gradually colder.

There was plenty of fuel on the downs, cut and uncut, for, being common land, the cottagers for miles around came and cut furze and heather, and faggoted and stacked them for their winter's need.

He wondered if any stack was near at hand and if it would be possible to light a fire?

As good fortune would have it, there was a small stack built in a hollow of the tor—no uncommon thing, as he remembered. To whom the fuel belonged he did not know. He did not care much. Necessity,

he told himself, knew no law. Hauling down a large faggot, he untied it, and broke the sticks across his knee. Then, going to a sheltered corner, he made a circle of loose stones, and began to pile his fuel. At the bottom he laid some dry grass and heather which he found in the centre of the faggot, and when the pile had been built to his satisfaction, he got out his matchbox, and struck a light.

His first attempt was a failure; also his second.

"What are you trying to do?" Sheila called from her sheltered nook.

"I want to warm you, if possible."

"Will it be possible to get a fire, do you think?"

"I hope so. If I don't get it, it shall not be for want of trying."

"You are good to me," she said, with a shake in her voice. "How shall I ever thank you?"

"Please don't try," he answered earnestly. "If I can only serve you, I shall want no thanks and no better reward."

A moment or two later a little tongue of flame leaped up, and then the dry heather began to crackle. A pillar of smoke rose straight as a rule for a few feet, and then the wind caught it and tore it into shreds. Taffy piled on more fuel, and soon the flames were roaring like a furnace and lighting up the grim face of the rocks and the dark spaces around.

Sheila came eagerly forward and knelt by the fire and stretched out her hands to meet the grateful warmth.

"Oh, this is lovely," she cried, and her bright eyes sparkled and her face glowed with pleasure.

Taffy watched her with a tense feeling at his heart.

He had not seen her for more than a year, and the sight of her lovely face glowing in the firelight threatened to break down all his reserve and self-control.

She saw that he was watching her, and she looked up at him fearlessly. "I must look an awful guy," she said, laughing. "I lost my hat at the very beginning of the storm; I tried my best to save the poor thing, but the wind tore it into ribbons and then swept it clean away."

"I was never out in such a gale before," he said quietly.

"It is an experience to be remembered," she laughed. "Don't you think so?"

"You must find it a very uncomfortable experience," he answered. "I am very sorry for you."

"Oh, I don't mind it in the least," she said gaily. "The storm isn't going to last for ever, and now that I have had something to eat I feel quite brave."

"I am glad you take it so cheerfully," he said, in the same quiet tone. He was still holding himself in check with a strong hand. Not that he shrank any longer from confessing his love, not that social considerations any more weighed with him. He was a man and she was a woman, and the mere accidents of birth seemed nothing to him now. But he was profoundly conscious of his own unworthiness, of his lack of culture, of what he termed his mental and spiritual inferiority. She was younger than he, but she had seen the world and life and had been brought into intimate contact with the culture of her age.

"She must look upon me as a country clown," he said to himself. "I expect I betray myself in every word and gesture. I know nothing of the

world in which she lives, have no skill in making phrases and saying the correct thing."

His only recommendation was that he loved her and had loved her for years. He had nothing to offer but himself and the bare comforts of life. And yet he knew that some day, if opportunity served, he would tell her. It was due to himself, and to her. It was only right that she should know that she had won his heart and that she dominated his life.

But the time was not yet. By being too precipitate he might spoil everything. It would look like taking an unfair advantage of her unprotected position if he spoke to her now. He would not for the world that she should think ill of him.

"Are you very angry with me for giving you so much trouble?" she questioned at length.

"Angry with you?" and he turned suddenly and faced her. "I could never be angry with you, whatever happened."

She laughed nervously and the colour mounted to her cheeks. "I did not know that you were given to making flattering speeches," she said.

"Why do you say that?" he questioned seriously. "Do you really think I am that sort of man?"

"All men are more or less given to flattery where ladies are concerned," she laughed.

He went and drew another faggot from the stack and piled more fuel on the fire. Then he threw himself on the ground by her side.

"I want you to think," he said slowly, "that it is no trouble to me to serve you, but a pleasure."

"I do think so," she said frankly and impulsively.

The flames leaped up again, and the furze and heather crackled cheerfully. She turned her eyes away from him and sat hugging her knees. Her rich, brown hair, loosed by the wind, was being tossed in all directions, her well-fitting blue serge dress was torn and mud-stained, and yet in his eyes she never looked more attractive.

For awhile they listened in silence to the crackling of the fire and the hurtling of the wind. Then he said suddenly: "I am glad you did not marry Mr. Discombe."

"I never dreamed of marrying Mr. Discombe," she answered, without turning her head.

"I feared differently when last we met."

"Why?"

"You questioned me respecting him."

"I know."

"Why did you do so?"

"I wanted to hear what you would say. You were very generous."

"You made it very hard for me."

"I?"

"Yes."

"In which way?"

"Cannot you guess?"

She turned her head and looked at him, but did not speak.

"You made me praise Smut," he went on, "when I loved you myself."

She still looked at him without replying. He saw the colour come and go upon her cheeks and a look come into her eyes which he could not interpret. But he was compelled to go on. He had committed himself, and there was no drawing back; he had

loosed the curb rein, and was no longer master of his will.

"I could not help myself," he went on, his voice quivering with emotion. "I loved you long before Smut had even seen you, loved you more than I loved my own soul; and when I saw how he seemed to win your confidence, knew of his visits at the Hall, heard him speak of the squire's friendliness, of your beauty and graciousness, and of his determination to win you, I grew bitterly envious and jealous and cursed the fate that had doomed me to poverty. Yet what could I do? I dared not aspire. You lived in a world apart from mine. I was bound to be silent. I ought to be silent now, I know. And yet, forgive me. I am a man, with a man's right to love and a man's right to hope——"

He stopped suddenly. She was no longer looking at him, but he saw that her lips were quivering and that there were tears upon her cheeks. The fire was burning low and the noise of the wind had almost ceased.

"Forgive me!" he cried. "Oh, please forgive me! I have hurt you, and you are sorry for me——"

She turned suddenly, her face glowing, her eyes filled with a soft and wonderful light. He saw her lips move, but no words escaped them.

The same moment a shout was raised close at hand, and three men stumbled into the ring of light caused by the fire.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOOD FOR REFLECTION

"WE saw the light in the sky and took it for a signal," the foremost of the three explained breathlessly. "Be you all right, miss?"

"Oh, yes; I am all right, Blake," Sheila said, springing to her feet and smiling at him. "I am very wet, of course, and I was very much frightened till Mr. Longton found me. Is my uncle very much concerned?"

"Well, mum, to be quite candid, he is," Blake answered frankly. "I told him quite plain as he needn't worry, that you'd be sure to find shelter somewhere; and, you see, I was right," and Blake smiled broadly.

"I don't know what I should have done if Mr. Longton had not found me," she answered with averted eyes. "I was almost frozen."

"It was a lucky thing he was able to light a fire," Ezra Bray the shoemaker interposed at this point. "It was the light up in the sky that gived us the cue. But we had a fight to get here."

"'Tweren't so bad while we was a-climbing," Tom Mundy, one of the gardeners, remarked, "but, oh, Lord! when we got to the top it nearly blowed our 'eads off. We jist 'ad to hold on to each other like grim death."

During this conversation Taffy had retired to the background. If the truth were told, he was not at all

grateful to the rescuing party. He would have preferred to have had all the honour of rescuing Sheila himself. The interposition of Blake and Mundy and Ezra Bray seemed an impertinence.

Moreover, they could not have arrived at a more inopportune moment. Had they delayed another five minutes—another minute—Sheila would have spoken and he would have known his fate. Now he was left in doubt and perplexity—left to imagine the worst, and to fear that he had offended her beyond hope of forgiveness. She did not turn her head once to look for him. She walked away between Blake and Mundy, holding tightly to their arms, leaving Ezra and himself to bring up the rear.

The wind had died down considerably and the stars were shining brightly overhead. It was still difficult to make headway over the uneven ground. Now and then Sheila stood still and gasped, while the wind tore at her skirts and rattled them like canvas sails.

Taffy did not offer to assist her. He and Ezra kept well in the rear. No word was spoken. To talk in the teeth of such a raging wind was next to impossible; but had it been the calmest night on record he would not have been disposed to talk. He felt hurt, humiliated. The coming of Blake and his companions just when they did was such an anti-climax that he wanted to go away and hide himself. He felt as though he would never be able to look Sheila in the face again.

He blamed himself for losing his self-control. He ought to have known better. It was a cowardly thing to take advantage of her unprotected position. No wonder she never once looked in his

direction. She was angry, as any woman in her position would be.

The more he reflected the more he was convinced that he had made a fool of himself. Now that the excitement was over the pendulum of his emotions swung to the opposite extreme. He marvelled at his own daring and marvelled equally at her generosity and self-control. No doubt she was very angry with him; no doubt she considered his avowal a piece of shameless impertinence, but her good nature allowed her to utter no word of rebuke. Perhaps she pitied him a little, and, if so, her pity would soften her anger.

So he reasoned with himself as he descended the steep hillside. Ezra was getting to be an elderly man and so was glad to move slowly. The others got farther and farther ahead. Taffy was glad of it on the whole. He made no attempt to overtake them. So great was his depression that he made up his mind never to see Sheila again if it could be avoided.

At the foot of the hill Sheila and her companions took the nearest way to the Hall. Taffy and Ezra struck out across the fields in the direction of Milor. No good nights were spoken at the parting of the ways; they drifted apart in silence, and a few days later it seemed probable that they would never meet again.

Taffy did not return to Restal that night. By the time he reached Milor he felt too utterly worn out in mind and body to go a step farther. There was scarcely an inch of his anatomy that did not ache, while his hands were so torn and swollen that he could hardly bear them. Mrs. Taplin insisted on

bathing them in hot water, while he recounted to her the story of his evening's adventures.

"Well, to think of it!" Mrs. Taplin said, with a catch in her breath. "The poor thing would have died if you had not found her."

"Oh, I don't know," he answered indifferently; "she would probably have found her way all right when the wind abated."

"But it's blowing hard still, and it must be terribly cold on the top."

"It is cold, no doubt, and, to make matters worse, her clothes were soaking wet."

"She'll be very grateful to you—she's that sort," Mrs. Taplin went on effusively. "I don't think I ever met a sweeter young lady. Everybody in Milor loves her. If Miss Peggy had one half her goodness she'd be lots more popular with the people."

"Nature is not always equally generous," Taffy said, with a laugh, and then he dried his hands and attacked the supper that his hostess had ordered for him.

He slept very little that night—his brain was too restless. Like a recurring decimal, the events of the evening kept passing and repassing before his mental vision. He recalled again every look in Sheila's eyes, every tone of her voice. Outside the wind still soughed in the trees and moaned round the gables of the house, and in every gust he seemed to hear her voice calling to him.

He grew less dissatisfied with the part he had played as the night wore on. After the violent reaction, his mind began to recover its normal tone. He told himself that after all he had done nothing that he need be ashamed of. He could not help

loving her, and there was nothing dishonourable in telling her so. Presumptuous it might be. No doubt, if Sir John knew, he would use a much stronger term; but, looking at the matter from his own standpoint, he could not see that he had any reason to regret the part he had played.

That he had bettered his chance or brightened his hope was more than doubtful. She had given him no word or look of encouragement. On the other hand, she had allowed him to go on with his confession to the end. She might have stopped him—had she been very angry she probably would have done—this in itself was not without significance.

But then, again, from the moment Blake and his companions appeared on the scene she never spoke to him, never even looked at him. She had parted from him without a word of thanks, without even a good night.

So, gathering up all the pros and cons, all that told in his favour, and all that told against him, there appeared to be nothing specially significant either side. He could not hope much and neither need he wholly despair.

He fell asleep at length, and when he awoke his room was flooded with soft, autumnal sunshine. He sprang out of bed at once, and began to dress. He knew it must be hours later than he was in the habit of getting up. He was still very stiff and his hands were terribly sore, but his heart was leaping to unheard music. He was happier than he had been for months past. Two facts stood out in his mind distinct and clear beyond everything else. The first was—Sheila was not the wife of Smut; the second was—he had been able to render her a service.

As he rode towards Blakeney, after breakfast, he felt thankful that he had confessed his love; nothing might come of it, but anyhow she knew. How that fact might affect her attitude towards him was still to be seen. But even if she hated him, he would not regret having told her. He had got on top of his social qualms once more. He was a man, and as a man he had a right to love and a right to tell the woman that he loved her.

So he rode toward Blakeney at a swinging trot, and felt once more that life was worth living and that the world was the best of all possible places.

Meanwhile Sheila was tossing on her pillow in a high fever. She felt strange directly she rose to her feet on the approach of Blake and his companions, but she fought against the feeling. She was curiously excited and thrilling through every fibre of her body. It was impossible to listen unmoved to such an avowal as that which fell from Taffy's lips, impossible now to say to him what she wanted to say and what she believed was her duty to say.

In a sense she resented the interruption of Blake as much as Taffy did, but in a different way. But she needed all her wits now to answer Blake's questions and to keep herself from falling. She was glad when he and Mundy came and stood one on each side of her and she was able to lean on their arms.

Out in the open she felt better, and was grateful for the wind's keen breath; but she had not gone far before she realised that she was going to be ill. Hot and cold waves seemed to run up and down her spine alternately. At one moment her teeth would

chatter as with an ague; the next, big drops of perspiration would be standing on her brow.

She scarcely noticed where she was going. For the most part she kept her eyes tightly shut, and trusted to the guidance of her companions. Her head ached terribly, and her temples throbbed as though they were being pounded with hammers.

Fortunately, she was not conscious of any weakness. She felt giddy at times, and there was a buzzing in her ears louder than the rushing of the wind; but that she did not mind so long as she was able to keep on her feet. She had an idea that Taffy was close behind, and that he would come on to the Hall.

Sir John and Peggy met her at the door, and then, for the first time, she turned round, as if expecting to see the others following. She waited for some moments, heedless of her cousin's chatter.

"I thought——" she began, then checked herself. She knew that Peggy would be angry when she discovered that Taffy was the first to come to her aid.

"I had better say nothing," was her second reflection, and she turned and walked into the house. She felt better when she got into the warmth and shelter of the big dining-room. Sir John poured her out a stiff glass of "something warm," which, however, she scarcely tasted. Peggy insisted on knowing what she had been doing with herself.

"I will tell you when I get into some dry clothes," she said, with a feeble laugh. "I'm rather afraid I have caught a bad cold."

"Then get a hot bath, my dear," Sir John said pompously. "Yes, get a hot bath—your story

will keep till morning—get a hot bath, and get into bed.”

“I will take your advice, uncle,” she said, smiling at him. “I am quite sure it is the best thing I can do,” and she walked slowly out of the room.

When at length the lights were out, and she was tucked up snug and warm for the night, she tried to recall all that had happened, but the effort was too great. She felt tired in mind and body. Every mental picture that shaped itself in her brain was blurred and confused. The past and present got inextricably mixed. Taffy and Smut seemed to change places, and she had a difficulty in deciding which was which. Was it true that both men had made love to her? or was it the same man with a different face? It was in trying to solve this problem that she fell into a troubled sleep, and when she awoke again Peggy was standing by her side.

“I heard you calling, dear,” Peggy explained. “Are you not well?”

“Well?” she questioned, and she knitted her brows and looked up into her cousin’s face with a wondering expression.

“You have had a bad dream, I think,” Peggy went on. “You got over-excited and over-tired last night.”

“What was I doing last night?” she questioned, “and who are you?”

Peggy ran out of the room at once and went and called one of the maids.

As soon as it was day Blake was despatched post haste for a doctor, and by noon everyone in the house knew that Miss Sheila was dangerously ill.

Sir John walked about the place with a sadly troubled face. He knew that pneumonia was a very dangerous thing, and he loved Sheila almost as much as he loved his own daughter.

Taffy heard the news three days later. He was riding through Milor again, and he called to pay his respects to Mrs. Taplin. If the truth must be told, he was not without hope that he might catch a glimpse of Sheila. He knew her habit of spending a good deal of her time out of doors, so he walked his horse slowly and looked eagerly in all directions.

Mrs. Taplin met his hearty greeting with a grave smile. "You have heard about Miss Sheila, of course?" she questioned.

"I have heard nothing," he said, the smile fading suddenly from his face.

"She is very ill."

"Ill?"

Mrs. Taplin nodded. "Got a chill on the downs the other night. Sir John is terribly afraid she'll not pull through."

Taffy dropped his eyes, but did not reply. He felt as though a giant hand had seized his heart and was squeezing it into pulp.

"The poor old man actually cried this morning when he called," Mrs. Taplin went on; "I've never seen him so cut up since I've known him."

"But people often get better of pneumonia," Taffy stammered at length, "especially young people."

"While there's life there's hope, of course," Mrs. Taplin admitted lugubriously; "but, by all accounts, her life is just hanging on a thread."

Taffy did not say any more. There was really nothing more to be said. He warmed his fingers for a few minutes by Mrs. Taplin's fire, and then turned and left.

As he rode slowly towards Blakeney he wondered whether he ought to be sorry. He would infinitely rather she died than that she married some other man. If she died, she would be his for ever. Nobody would be able to take her from him then. He would treasure her in his memory and in his heart; he would lay flowers on her grave when no one was near and commune with her when he was alone; he would call her his dream-wife, and she would be always young and always fair. There would be no familiarity to breed indifference, no care or trouble to dim the brightness of her eyes. The years would pass, and his own locks would turn grey, but she would be beyond the touch of time; her beauty would never fade.

He was roused from his reverie by the rattle of wheels behind him, and a moment or two later a familiar voice called :

"Hello, is that you, Taffy?"

"Aunt Jane!" he exclaimed, turning suddenly in his saddle. "Why, I haven't seen you for an age."

"I don't come into Blakeney much," she said, with a sniff. "Blakeney is slow. I prefer Exeter."

"Exeter, eh! But that means a long railway journey."

"Oh, distance is nothing these times," she answered, with fine disdain. "I'm going to London next week."

"To London, eh?" he questioned, with lifted

eyebrows. "You haven't chosen a very cheerful month for your visit."

"If I was going on pleasure I don't suppose I should choose November," she answered, with the same air of lofty importance; "but, you see, I'm goin' on business."

"That makes a difference, of course."

"I'm rather lookin' forward to it, do you know?" she said, screwing up her small eyes until they looked like two narrow slits.

"You will find London interesting, no doubt."

"You have not heard from Smut lately, I suppose?"

"Not for a good many weeks. Have you?"

"Oh, no. What should he write to me for? He's far too big a pot for that. I suppose you know he's back from his honeymoon?"

"No; I had not heard."

"Returned in a great hurry. Between you an' me, Smut's made a fool of himself."

"How so?"

"Why, in marryin' a gal whose father's let him in no end."

"Who said so?"

"Oh, never you mind. But I get to hear of things now and then," and she whipped up her pony and drove on ahead.

Taffy looked after her with a puzzled expression in his eyes. He had never seen anyone alter so much in so short a time. She was expensively but ridiculously attired, and carried herself with an air of jaunty superiority that at one time was quite foreign to her nature.

"I don't understand Aunt Jane," he said

reflectively. "She puzzles me more and more every time I see her. I wonder what she is up to? and how is it that she has always the latest news of Smut?"

He rode very slowly the rest of the way to Restal; the day had provided him with abundant food for reflection.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WAYS OF WOMEN

AUNT JANE was in debt, so deeply in debt, in fact, that she began to feel a little alarmed. Never had she been so pressed for money as since she began to blackmail Smut. Her income was five times larger than ever it had been before, but her expenditure far outran her income. She had set herself up as a lady, had intimated to her neighbours that she had come into a fortune, had so far imposed upon her husband that he had given up work, had launched out in all directions in order to impress her neighbours, and had got goods on credit wherever tradesmen would trust her.

Like most people brought up in poverty, she had no true conception of the value of money. "Set a beggar on horseback," says the old adage, "and he will ride to the devil." Give him a hundred pounds, and he becomes a profligate. The most wasteful and extravagant servants are those brought up in the poorest homes. Jane Jupp imagined that Smut was good for almost any amount, and, like most selfish and short-sighted people, she never reckoned on contingencies. That he might turn stupid and refuse her demands, she would not believe. She thought she knew him too well for that. There was too much at stake, and he was not such a fool—so she told herself—as to jeopardise three thousand a year for the sake of three or four hundred.

So Aunt Jane went merrily on her way and did the grand lady to her heart's content. She bought a pony and trap, bought expensive gowns, bought new furniture, and moved into a larger house. She did not reckon up what all these things cost her. It was so easy to get goods on credit, so flattering to her pride to be treated as a lady of means. Before she had Smut to draw upon she had to pay cash down for every halfpennyworth she got. Now she was lifted above such humiliation for ever. The sensation was very delightful, and she made the most of it.

When the bills, however, began to pour in, and she had no money in hand to meet them, she felt somewhat disconcerted. The amounts somehow were larger than she had anticipated. Smut would have to send her a much larger sum than he had hitherto done. Up to the present he had sent her comparatively small amounts at fairly regular intervals. At first they had seemed to her quite large amounts; but what was affluence when she and her husband were living on fifteen shillings a week was poverty now.

She wrote and told Smut of her need, hinted that while she had been nursing his mother things had got behind. Bills were coming in that had to be paid, and she needed a considerable sum to clear off her liabilities.

Smut sent her an angry letter, some very sound advice, and twenty pounds. A fortnight later he sent another twenty pounds, and told her that it was the last of his money she would ever see. Jane smiled knowingly when she read his angry outburst; she was not in the least frightened by his threats.

At the time, however, when she overtook Taffy on his way to Blakeney matters had reached a crisis.

Smut had turned stupid, and apparently had dared her to do her worst. She had asked him for money several times, and he had point-blank refused to send her any. What was to be done ?

The more she thought about the matter the more clearly she saw that he was not as completely in her hands as she had imagined. At the beginning he was, no doubt, very anxious that the secret should be kept because he wanted to marry Sheila Leyland. But, now that he was actually married, she soon had evidence that he was much less concerned. So in her desperation she resolved to go to London and see him. She was not good at writing letters, but if she could talk to him face to face she was not without hope that she would bring him to his senses.

Outwardly she put a bold face on the matter, and pretended that she was enjoying life to the full ; but in her heart she knew that she was far happier when her husband worked at his trade, and they lived in a little cottage and paid their way on fifteen shillings a week.

Playing the fine lady on money got by blackmailing had very serious drawbacks. There seemed to be no real happiness outside the circle of honest living. She envied Taffy as she drove away from him. He had been robbed of his inheritance, and left to fight the world alone ; but he was happier than any of them, happier than Ruth had ever been, happier than she was, happier than Smut. God's laws were painfully just and inflexible. There was no wrongdoing but brought its punishment.

Smut was also realising this very acutely. The farther he deviated from the straight path of truth

and honour, the more slippery became the way. He had tried, like too many others, to forget unpleasant things in wine and in questionable company, and he awoke each morning with the feeling that he had lost ground, that he was steadily trampling his manhood in the mire, that all that was in him of value he had sacrificed to the lust of ease and pleasure.

For awhile he believed that if he could win Sheila Leyland she would redeem him from his weakness and make a man of him; and yet there were times when he almost shrank from her presence. Her purity scorched him like a flame. Had he been pure himself, he could have looked fearlessly into her eyes and declared his love in a way that would at least have won her respect. But his glance was no longer steady, and his breath smelt of alcohol.

He was not greatly surprised that she refused his offer. He would have been less humbled if he could have been quite sure there was no scorn in her voice. The little speech he had prepared he never uttered. Her answer came, sharp and emphatic, almost before the words were out of his mouth. He could not accuse her of giving him encouragement—she had never done so; she had been friendly and kind, as was her nature to be, but he could never say she had flirted with him even in the remotest degree. He knew that he was not worthy of her, and far less worthy than when he first saw her at Crowdale Farm. Since that day he had been seeing life in London, and the stain of it was black upon his heart.

Sheila's refusal touched him to the quick. It humbled him, too, and saddened him. He had looked to her as the only means of his salvation. If

she failed him there would be no hand to hold him in the slippery places of life. He was conscious of a steadily increasing weakness, of a steady diminution of self-control; but with her love and sympathy and help he might still conquer. Temptation would lose its power if she were by his side. He had no confidence in himself; he had every confidence in her.

For several days he was intensely miserable. He was quite sure he would never admire a woman again as he admired her, quite sure that no other woman would exercise the same influence over him. Enid Cuff had attracted him, and attracted him greatly, but not in the way that Sheila did. The two women were not to be compared. They belonged to different types. The one appealed to his pride and selfishness, the other to his manhood—or what there was left of it.

He spent nearly a week in bemoaning his bad fortune, and then he began to recover. Much as he loved Sheila, he loved himself more. Life had still its excitements, its pleasures, its compensations. There was no need that he should spend his evenings alone. If Sheila Leyland had spurned him, there were others who would welcome him.

By the end of a fortnight he had begun to philosophise on the subject. Sheila's refusal might, after all, be a blessing in disguise. It would be very difficult to live up to her standard. Good people were often very trying, and those great, honest eyes of hers had a habit of looking right down into his. He felt sometimes as though she read every secret of his soul, and that was a gift he by no means appreciated. A man's secret life belonged to himself, and if his

wife once began to suspect, it would be fatal to domestic peace.

So as the days dragged away he began to take what he called a common-sense view of the situation. Possibly he would be happier with a woman who had less lofty ideals than Sheila had. The enduring thing, after all, was not idealism, but hard cash. Love's young dream was, no doubt, beautiful enough while it lasted; but, then, it never did last—that was clear enough in the lives of most married people. The honeymoon appeared, in most instances, to tone down the poetry to common prose.

By the end of a month he was lavishing his attentions once more on Enid Cuff. Enid welcomed him back with unaffected pleasure. She had felt herself stranded of late. The Hon. Walter Butt had failed her. Hence, when one day she saw Smut driving home with her father, she secretly clapped her hands with delight.

She had feared that she had offended him beyond forgiveness. She did not know that his disaffection was due to quite other causes; had she known, her welcome might have been a little less cordial. She believed quite honestly that she had driven him away—she did not see how it could be otherwise. That he had been very fond of her she was quite certain; indeed, one morning he almost proposed to her, and possibly would have done so, but for Cyril, who unexpectedly appeared on the scene. She liked him, too. On the whole, she liked him better than the brewer's son; only, socially, Watty, of course, was a much better catch, and a girl was bound to keep her eye on the main chance. That she had tried her best to hook Watty there was no denying, and, of course,

Mr. Discombe had seen it. She was surprised that he had come to Ravenscourt again. He had evidently met her father in town, and Sir Jonathan, who knew nothing of the flirtation, had invited him down. It was very nice of her father and it was very good of Mr. Discombe to come.

She hurried downstairs with unusual alacrity and greeted Smut in the hall.

"We quite thought you had forsaken us," she said in her most charming manner, and she let her hand linger in his for a moment.

"Your father was good enough to ask me to return with him," he said quite simply. He did not intend to show undue cordiality at the outset. He did not know how much her friendliness might mean. Also, he could not forget that he had forsaken her for a more charming personality. He wondered if she knew. He hoped she did not. It would be unpleasant to enter into explanations.

"We are very glad to see you," she answered, with a droop of her eyelids; "it will seem like old times."

"I am awfully pleased to be here," he replied promptly. "I have always enjoyed so much my visits to Ravenscourt."

"And you will stay quite a long time?" she questioned, raising her eyes timidly to his.

"Not a long time, I fear. I must be back in town again in a few days."

"Are you so busy? What a pity you did not come down sooner. Cyril went back only last week."

"For his last term?"

"Yes. He will be home for good in June."

"He will be sorry to leave Oxford, I expect."



"As she passed the tea her fingers touched his"
(see page 283).

"I don't know. You were not."

"Oh, yes, I was, in a sense. But, you see, I had to be doing something practical. It was no use wasting any more time over law."

"And you like being in the City?"

"Very much. One seems to be alive when one is in the rush of things."

"Oh, you men! You seem unable to exist without some form of excitement."

"Is that so? And what of the ladies?"

"Oh, we have to vegetate—that is, generally speaking," and she laughed good-humouredly.

A footman brought in tea, and Smut dropped into a comfortable chair. Enid sat opposite, and raised the sugar-tongs. "One lump or two?" and she smiled at him in the most bewitching way.

"No sugar, thank you. I like the flavour of the tea."

"Cream, of course?" and she raised her eyes shyly.

"If you please,"—and Smut's heart fluttered slightly.

As she passed the tea her fingers touched his. It was pure accident, of course, but somehow it sent a little thrill right up to his shoulder.

As the tea proceeded Smut found himself casting furtive glances at her from time to time. There could be no doubt she was very pretty; also she had charming manners, and she certainly knew how to dress.

He lay awake for several hours that night thinking. For many reasons it might be a good thing for him if he got married. He had got into a very loose and expensive way of living; he needed someone to steady him. Besides, at the rate he was going on,

he would soon need a larger income. Aunt Jane had become a perfect vampire, and, to make matters worse, his "flutters" on the Stock Exchange had not turned out as he had anticipated. During the last week or two he had been worried a good deal. Markets had dropped where he expected a rise; of course, they would go up eventually, and he would get all his own back with plenty in addition, but in the meanwhile it was trying to the nerves to feel that a considerable slice of his fortune was at stake.

If he married Enid he would get into perfectly smooth water. Sir Jonathan would be certain to make her a handsome allowance. Besides, being chairman of so many companies, Sir Jonathan would be able to put a few things in his way. From a business as well as from a domestic point of view, marrying Enid might be his salvation.

On the following day Enid gave him many opportunities of being alone with her.

"I hope I shall not bore you," she said, with one of her most bewitching smiles. "But really there is no one else to entertain you. If only Cyril were at home——"

"I couldn't possibly be more delightfully entertained," he interrupted gallantly.

"You can be alone whenever you want to be," she said coyly. "I am really quite good at taking hints."

"It is awfully good of you to take yourself away from more pressing duties——" he began.

"Oh, not at all," she protested. "It is my first duty to entertain my father's guests to the best of my poor ability."

"I am sure your father's guests have never anything to complain of in that respect."

"Please don't flatter, Mr. Discombe. I don't like flattery," and she dropped her eyelids very becomingly.

It was his turn to protest now, and he did so with a great show of sincerity.

At the end of three days Smut returned to town, but a fortnight later he motored to Ravenscourt again. He had made up his mind to try his luck a second time. Markets were still falling, and he wanted to be prepared for eventualities. As the son-in-law of Sir Jonathan Cuff he would be able to meet the worst with equanimity.

Enid met him with a charming diffidence and yet with a cordiality that left nothing to be desired. Sir Jonathan was friendliness itself; in fact, Smut was soon made to feel that if he wanted to marry Enid there would be no opposition on the part of the parents.

Smut was nervous, however. He did not understand women very well, and he dreaded getting a second rebuff. Enid's fits of shyness puzzled him, and when she pouted his heart went into his shoes.

Moreover, the longer he stayed the colder and more distant she seemed to get. He began seriously to fear that he had no chance, and the less his chance grew the more valuable seemed the prize. He lost sight of her defects, and could think only of her excellences.

One day she kept out of sight till evening. Smut grew almost desperate. He wondered how he had ever thought so lightly of her. Now that he feared his chance was gone he wanted her terribly. When

at length she came to him, as he brooded alone in the library, he sprang up with the courage of despair in his eyes and caught her in his arms and kissed her.

"Oh, Mr. Discombe!" she cried, trying feebly to extricate herself from his embrace.

"I can't help it," he said desperately. "I want you terribly. You must see I do. I am just miserable without you."

"I thought you were getting too much of me," she said, with a droop of the eyelids and a pitiful sigh.

"Too much of you!" he cried passionately; "that can never be. I want you always. I came down here to tell you so. Why have you kept out of my way? Why are you so cold with me?"

"I am not cold," she answered, with shining eyes. "But how should I know——?"

"But you surely must have seen," he pleaded. "Oh, Enid—you will let me call you Enid, will you not?"

"If you want to very much," and she dropped her eyes and blushed.

He caught her in his arms again and kissed her a second time. "I do so want you to be my wife," he said earnestly; "I do, really. Won't you consent?"

She turned away her head from him so that he could only see the tip of her ear, and her words came almost in a whisper. "It is so sudden, Mr. Discombe. You really ought to give me time to think."

"No! no!" he cried, having grown quite courageous. "Delays are always dangerous. There is no time like the present. Say you will, Enid, and

make me the happiest man in the world," and he pressed her tightly in his arms.

"Oh, you are so strong," she pleaded, raising her face toward his. "What can I do when you imprison me like this?"

"Say yes," he whispered, and he bent down and kissed her again.

"Don't you think you will regret it if I do?" she whispered, blushing.

"Regret it? Never!" he cried gallantly.

"Then I suppose you must have your way," she answered timidly, and she raised her mouth to be kissed.

CHAPTER XXVI

TRAGEDY

SMUT had been away barely three weeks on his honeymoon when news reached him that his father-in-law had become bankrupt. At first he refused to believe it. It was some stupid or malicious canard. Sir Jonathan was believed to be a millionaire, and it was incredible that he should have lost all his money in so short a time. To his astonishment, however, Enid manifested no surprise and, what was worse still, showed very little concern.

"Then you believe it is true?" he questioned, with pallid lips.

"I expect it is," she answered, with a laugh.

"Really, Enid," he cried in amazement, "it is no laughing matter!"

"It can make no difference to us," she answered lightly. "Your fortune is safe——"

"But what of *your* fortune?" he interrupted. "It is awfully rough on you."

"Oh, as long as you have plenty, it does not matter in the least," she protested lightly.

"But it does matter," he insisted, almost angrily. "It matters everything."

"But you did not marry me for my money?"

"Well—no—of course—not," he stammered. "That is—I mean I married you for yourself alone. Only—well, you see—I thought if anything happened to me you would be provided for."

"Well, I shall be provided for, shan't I, if anything happens to you? You wouldn't leave your money away from your wife?"

"Of course not. All that I have is yours—in a sense. I mean that while I have anything you will not want. Only, of course, there are always contingencies. Think of your father."

"Father's been living on a volcano for years."

"You knew that?"

"Oh, no, I knew nothing," she answered, blushing violently. "Father has always been close about his business affairs, but one has intuitions, you know."

"Oh!"

"Why do you say 'Oh' in that way?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all. I was only thinking. This news has upset me a good deal. We shall have to return at once."

"Return where?"

"To London, dear. We cannot stay here in the circumstances."

"Why not? I am sure we are better here than at home."

"You may think so, but you don't know everything."

"I don't think that is a very nice thing to say; but, anyhow, I don't intend going back just yet," and she tossed her head defiantly and smiled.

"But if I return you are bound to return with me," he said, in a tone of annoyance.

"Why bound?" she questioned sharply. "I don't see that I am bound to do anything of the sort."

"But surely, Enid, you would not let me go back alone?"

"Really, my dear," she said, with mild sarcasm, "it seems to me you are looking at the matter from an entirely wrong standpoint. I have not suggested leaving you. It is you who talk of leaving me."

"No, no, Enid," he said in milder tones; "I do not want to leave you—you must know that very well. Only, dear, I really must get back to London, I really must. This affair of your father's is very serious. It may mean more than you think."

"Oh, that is all nonsense," she answered testily. "It can't possibly mean anything to you. You have never been associated with him in business——"

"Not directly," he interrupted; "but things are so mixed up in these days——"

"Which means that you are determined to go?" she snapped.

"I fear I must," he said, with downcast eyes.

"Then you will have to return for me," she said, with decision. "I am not going back to London until this blows over. Father will pull himself through all right."

"I don't want to spoil your pleasure or curtail your holiday," he said meekly, "but Monte Carlo is a very expensive place, and not exactly a nice place for you to remain in alone."

She laughed harshly and defiantly. "I am quite well able to look after myself," she said; "and as for the expense—well, I haven't spent all my father gave me yet by a long way."

To this he made no reply. He saw she was determined to have her own way, and he was particularly anxious just then to avoid a scene.

Later in the day he left for London, feeling very perplexed and miserable. The glamour of the honey-

moon had already passed. Enid was, somehow, different from what he had expected. She had thrown off the gentle reticence he had admired so much, her voice had taken a harsher note, her manner had become bolder and more assertive. The shy maiden, with alluring smiles, had disappeared, and in her place was a sharp-tongued woman.

It was very disappointing to be so quickly disillusioned. He wondered if all women were alike—if they all wore a mask before marriage, and threw it off directly the knot was tied.

He was bitterly chagrined, also, at his father-in-law's failure. He had counted so much on Enid's fortune and on the help Sir Jonathan would be to him in business, and now all his hopes had gone down like a house of cards, and he stood helpless amid the ruins.

He wondered if Enid knew what was coming. It looked not unlikely; indeed, he was not at all sure that he had not been deliberately trapped. Looking back, it appeared as though all the events that led up to their hasty marriage had been carefully planned. He had been caught with guile and hurried unwittingly to his doom.

To make matters worse, he had allowed the Cuffs to assume that he was much better off than he was. He would have to pay now for his foolish pride and vanity. It would be very humiliating to have to tell Enid that they would have to live in a very modest way, but the sooner she knew the truth the better it would be for both.

He found, as he feared, that he had been hit by Sir Jonathan's failure. There was a complete slump in a certain class of securities which he had been

induced to buy in the hope of big dividends. His income, instead of being three thousand a year, would be considerably less for the future unless he could make some lucky haul on the Stock Exchange.

He remained in London three weeks, and then returned to Monte Carlo to find Enid quite happy and surrounded by a bevy of admirers. She had been to the casino every day, she informed him, and had had such a run of good luck that she was a good deal better off than when he left her.

She manifested no pleasure at seeing him back. "You might have remained away another month," she said, "and I should be quite content."

"So it seems," he answered bitterly. "You appear to have made a host of friends."

"Oh, yes, any number, and such nice fellows too."

"And they have been teaching you to gamble."

"Don't be a fool, Smut. It's no worse than playing bridge, anyhow; no worse than speculating on the Stock Exchange."

He flushed uncomfortably and was silent for several minutes. Then he said quietly: "I think, Enid, it is time we returned to London and set up a little house of our own."

"We might stay here a few weeks longer," she pouted. "What is the use of going back to that silly old London?"

"The truth is, Enid," he said gravely, "we can't afford to stay here."

"Not afford!" she snapped. "Don't be mean. You know you are rolling in money."

"Unfortunately, I have lost a good deal lately,"

he said, with averted eyes; "and when I tell you we can't afford to stay here I mean it."

"How much have you lost?" she demanded sharply.

"Ten thousand pounds, at least."

She laughed harshly. "Only ten thousand," she said. "I thought by the face you were pulling you had lost a quarter of a million."

"I never had a quarter of a million to start with," he answered quietly.

"Oh, indeed. I expect you will be telling me next that you are quite poor?"

"I am poor, comparatively speaking."

"You mean that?"

"I do—honestly."

"Then why did you not tell me this before we were married?" she asked, with blazing eyes.

"I did not think there was any necessity."

"And you allowed me to think you had tons of money?"

"It was no business of mine what you thought," he answered sharply.

"But it was your business. Do you think father would have invited you to Ravenscourt if he had known?"

"So he invited me because he thought I was rich, eh?"

"Why else should he invite you?"

"I see. He knew he was going to smash, and wanted you safely provided for. I must confess it was a very pretty little plot."

"Plot?" she almost shrieked. "How dare you? If you don't withdraw those words I will never speak to you again."

He withdrew the words after awhile, but the harmony of their wedded life was too completely broken to be restored again.

Every few days the bickering broke out afresh. Each knew that the other had been deceived, and such knowledge was fatal to domestic peace.

On getting back to London Enid insisted on having rooms at the Savoy. She was not going to be bothered with servants and housekeeping; she had not got married to be a slave.

Smut yielded with a wry face. One by one his hopes and dreams vanished into thin air; the domestic peace, the restraining hand, the inspiring presence of a strong and helpful wife—nothing was left. He was more utterly derelict than before his marriage.

Enid, instead of helping him, hindered him. He had an occasional good impulse still—momentary longings for higher things. He saw the best dimly in the distance, but he had no strength of his own to reach it, and when he turned to Enid for help she only pushed him farther back.

He could hardly believe at times that she was the same Enid that he had so much admired at Ravenscourt. She was good-looking still—distinctly so—with pretty manners, when she chose, and alluring ways—to a certain type of men; but she was as destitute of ideals as an oyster. She had no passion for anything great or heroic, no vision of anything beyond the narrow limits of flesh and sense.

Matters did not mend when they settled down to what Enid called "the simple life." He tried his best spasmodically to retrieve his dwindling fortune,

but with no success. He had never been trained in business habits, and his friends the financiers proved too sharp for him.

To make matters worse, Aunt Jane was constantly dunning him for money. He was living on the edge of a volcano, and the strain threatened to shatter his nerves. He became irritable, depressed, and, worse than all, reckless. He drank more and more heavily to drown remorse, turned back to his old haunts and his old companions, and left his wife to spend her evenings alone or in such company as she chose for herself.

He realised acutely that he was going from bad to worse, that he was drifting to utter shipwreck. Once or twice in his saner moments he tried to pray, but prayer was impossible until he was prepared to make restitution. How could he ask God to help him to live a life of fraud? So he felt himself cut off from deliverance, even from hope. There was no help anywhere. He had no strength of his own, his wife despised him, and the people he called his friends were pushing him downwards all the time.

Had he been a man of coarser texture he would have suffered less. He remembered better days; he had been brought up religiously; had once been proud and jealous of his good name; had cherished lofty ambitions—and he had come to this!

Outwardly, he was respectable still—he dressed well and dined at the most fashionable restaurants; but in front of him he saw disaster, complete and irretrievable. He was no longer living on the interest of his capital. He had got far beyond that. He had to sell stock to meet current expenses. The

savings of Henry Discombe were growing less and less.

Enid was deaf to all entreaty. She believed that Smut was rich in spite of all his protestations to the contrary. When he complained of her extravagance she told him that he was mean; when he urged her for her own sake to economise she laughed at him.

He continued to make desperate attempts from time to time to retrieve his fortune, but he was always too early or too late. He bought in the dear markets and sold in the cheap; his flutters proved to be frosts; his booms were nearly always slumps.

He had been plunging heavily and disastrously when Aunt Jane appeared on the scene. Her coming was the last straw. To have her writing to him constantly was bad enough, but to have her at his elbow, to be in danger of meeting her at every turn was intolerable.

What was to be done? Was it possible to get free of her? She was a stranger in London, ignorant of its ways, unsuspecting of its dangers. No one knew her; no one would miss her.

The thought was like a seed in prepared soil—it grew rapidly. Almost before he was aware, it obsessed him.

“You must have dinner with me to-night,” he said, “and we will talk the matter over.”

“And you will introduce me to your wife?”

“Do you think I had better?” he questioned mildly. “You see, no one knows of our relationship.”

“But I want to see her,” she said petulantly.

“That is natural, no doubt. But she does not

know of your existence. You surely don't want to awaken suspicion?"

Aunt Jane looked thoughtful. "You couldn't say that I am your aunt, could you?"

"That would be letting the cat out of the bag with a vengeance," he laughed.

"And yet I am your aunt. You are my sister Ruth's own son."

"Well, we need not discuss that now," he said, crushing back his rising anger. "You have come for money, I understand?"

"I have."

"And I am hard up."

"I don't believe it."

"Nobody believes it, unfortunately—that's where the trouble comes in," and he laughed good-humouredly.

His easy and friendly manner disarmed Aunt Jane, and she became suddenly bold and confident.

"You have three thousand a year," she said, "and I want three hundred of it."

"Oh, you do?"

"I do. And, what is more, I am going to get it."

"Your demand certainly does not err on the side of modesty," he said, with mild sarcasm.

"It's much better to know exactly how we stand," she said, ignoring the sarcasm. "When we fix on a regular sum it'll be easier for both of us."

"And three hundred is the sum you have fixed?"

"It's the lowest I am going to take."

"And if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse; you've too much of your father in you."

He did not speak for several moments. They

were walking along the Strand towards Trafalgar Square. It was a chilly, drizzly evening in late November. The side-walks were thronged with people, the streets crowded with 'buses and cabs. The arc lights flashed on the gleaming pavements and threw bewildering shadows in all directions. Policemen on point duty were splashed to the neck; drivers of motor-'buses, in their leather clothes, looked like spectres from the infernal regions; jehus on horse-'buses threw insulting remarks at them.

Suddenly Smut paused on the edge of the pavement.

"Where are you taking me to?" Aunt Jane inquired.

"To a restaurant to get some dinner."

"Good heavens, what a throng and roar! Is it always like this?"

"Nearly always."

"Have we to walk across?"

"Yes."

"We shall never do it."

"Oh, nonsense! It is quite easy. You follow me."

There was a momentary pause in the traffic, and Smut stepped out into the roadway. Aunt Jane followed, gathering her skirts tightly around her. In the middle of the street he stopped. The tide of traffic closed suddenly round them. A huge motor-'bus, with blazing eyes, seemed close upon them. "Step back!" he cried hoarsely.

Aunt Jane stepped back, not heeding the traffic behind her. Smut stood still.

He did not see anything, he only heard. When at length he turned his head the lumbering motor-'bus

had come to a standstill. A crowd of people gathered swifter than flies. Policemen ran from various points. All the traffic stopped. The woman was dragged from underneath the 'bus, and laid on the edge of the pavement.

"She's dead enough," he heard a policeman say. He knew that well enough. He had heard the crunching of the bones, and would hear it to his dying day.

The tide of traffic swept on as though nothing had happened. He heaved a sigh as he made his way across Cockspur Street and so into Piccadilly. He felt a little flat and faint. It was all so sudden and tragic. A few minutes ago he was walking along the Strand with Aunt Jane; now he was alone, and she——!

He shuddered unconsciously.

"Anyhow," he reflected, "she will not bother me again. That nightmare is removed."

He discovered before the night was out that another had taken its place.

CHAPTER XXVII

TAFFY IS PERPLEXED

TAFFY sat alone indulging in a quiet smoke. He had had a busy and tiring day, and was glad of the long evening, with its chance of solitude and rest. A cheerful fire crackled in the grate and gave to the room a sense of cosiness and warmth. On a table near him lay an open book which he had been reading, but which he had just laid down in order to light his pipe. Outside a fitful wind moaned occasionally through the bare trees—that and the crackling of the fire were the only sounds that broke the stillness.

Suddenly the door was thrown open, and Ned Jupp staggered into the room. Halfway across the floor he paused and drew his hand across his eyes as though the light dazzled him, then advanced close to Taffy's chair.

He carried his hat in his left hand, his hair was dishevelled, his shoes covered with mud, his lips apart, his eyes staring as though he had seen a ghost.

"Taffy, my boy," he said in gasps, "I be afraid as 'ow my missus 'as been and got killed up in London."

"Got killed?" Taffy questioned, springing to his feet. "What do you mean, uncle?"

"This appeared in the paper to-night—read it," and Ned pulled a copy of an evening paper out of

his pocket and pointed to a paragraph headed "Motor-'Bus Accident."

Taffy took the paper from his hand and read: "An unknown woman, crossing Trafalgar Square last evening about six o'clock, was run over by a motor-'bus. She was taken at once to the Charing Cross Hospital, where it was discovered that life was extinct. In her purse were two sovereigns, some silver, and the return half of a railway ticket to Blakeney. Her pocket-handkerchief was initialed with two J's worked in silk."

Taffy laid down the paper and looked at Ned without speaking.

"Well," Ned questioned in a hoarse and tremulous voice, "what d'you make of it?"

"It may not be Aunt Jane," he said slowly, turning away his eyes. "People are being constantly run over in London."

"But what about the return ticket to Blakeney, and the handkercher with the two J's in the corner? I tell you it's Jane, safe enough," and he gulped down a lump that had risen in his throat.

Taffy pointed to a chair, and Ned dropped into it heavily.

"It's a bit disquieting," Taffy said, after a pause. "When did she go to London?"

"Yesterday morn. She's been puttin' it off for weeks. 'Twas somethin' 'bout her property. The money ain't been comin' in reg'lar as it ought to——"

"What is this property?" Taffy questioned hesitatingly; "I have never been able to make head or tail of it."

"Nor me neither," Ned replied, wiping his fore-

head with a red pocket-handkerchief. "She's been terrible close 'bout it. I've axed 'er heaps and heaps of times, but 'No,' she says, 'you don't understand it, Ned,' an' so I has to give in. Women be curious critters."

"But if anything has happened to her, what about the property?" Taffy questioned.

"That's wot's a worriting me," Ned replied lugubriously. "Not that I ain't fond of Jane, and all that. But if she's been and got 'killed, I'm up a tree," and Ned wiped his brow again.

"Then you don't know whom she went to see in London?"

"No mor'n you do. She said as 'twas some lawyer fellow as managed the estate; but atween you and me and the gatepost, I 'ave my doubts."

"Doubts of what?"

"'Bout there bein' any estate. It ain't reason, I says. Estates ain't private things, they'm public."

"But she evidently came into possession of money."

"Ay, that's so. She brought money back wi' 'er from Crowdale after your mother died, and money's been comin' to 'er ever since more or less reg'lar."

Taffy knitted his brow and looked thoughtful. "But have you no idea where the money comes from?" he questioned. "No—no—theory of your own, shall I say?"

"Well, I can't say as I 'ave," Ned replied, mopping his forehead once more. "You see, the money comed in notes; there weren't no cheques and there weren't no names, and the letters were wrote with one of them machines."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"I seen one of the letters myself and read a part of it. There weren't no address at the top nor no name at the bottom. I ain't a very good reader, but I made out that the man as wrote the letter was purty mad. Then Jane snatched it out of my hand and was a good deal flustered."

For several moments there was silence in the room. Taffy was thinking furiously. Ned stared vacantly into the fire.

"It is no business of mine," Taffy said at length, "and yet, as a relative, I'm naturally curious. If anything has happened to Aunt Jane the whole matter will have to be looked into."

"That's just it," Ned replied promptly; "the very thing I've called to see you 'bout. I caan't go to London—I'd get lost sooner'n you could wink; but you've been there, and if you'd just go up an' inquire, and make sure of things, as it were, I'd be mighty thankful."

"Of course I will go," Taffy answered. "I will do anything and everything I can for you. I wish you knew the name and address of the man she went to see."

Ned leaned forward and stared more abstractedly than ever into the fire. For several moments he did not speak. Then he said, slowly and hesitatingly, "Between you and me, Taffy, I've sometimes wondered whether she 'ad any sort of pull on Mr. Discombe."

Taffy gave a little gasp and sat bolt upright in his chair.

"How pull? What do you mean, Uncle Ned?" he questioned.

"Well, I don't know as 'ow I mean anything in partic'lar," he answered, still staring into the fire; "but one can't 'elp thinkin' a bit at times, and I axes myself these questions: Who is there in London as Jane knows? Who is there 'mong all her 'quaintances as 'as got any money? Who was likely to send her 'ome from Crowdale wi' five-poun' notes in 'er pocket? Now, to all them questions there ain't but one answer as far as I can see."

"Then you think she went up to London to see Mr. Discombe?"

"Well, to tell 'ee the truth, I 'ardly know what I think. I keep moiderin' an' tryin' to put two an' two together, as it were, an' somehow the sum always works out the same way."

"You mean that the money comes from Mr. Discombe?"

"Oh, I may be altogether wrong. I ain't got no 'ead for business, as Jane always says; but, as far as I can see, there ain't nobody else."

"But why should he give her money? And, by all accounts, she has had a good deal."

"Oh, bless 'ee, we've been livin' in clover: bacon an' eggs for breakfast, beef or mutton every day for dinner, rabbit pie and such things for supper, white tablecloth every meal, two lots of knives and forks, silver-plated spoons, carpets on all the floors, curtains afore the windows—six foot long, lovely red quilts on the beds filled wi' feathers, china teacups fit for a king to drink out of, an' no end of finery to put on 'er back."

Taffy could hardly help smiling, serious as was the position and apprehensive as he felt. He rose at

length and touched the bell, and, in answer, Honor Pinder appeared on the scene.

"Will you get supper at once," he said, "for myself and Mr. Jupp? Also get out my gladstone bag and a few things for a journey. I am going to London to-night."

Mrs. Pinder curtsied and retired, and Taffy sat down again.

"It's awful good of you, Taffy, to look after things for me," Ned said slowly. "To tell 'ee the truth, I'm struck all of a 'eap. If Jane's killed—an' I don't doubt she is—I'm done for. I can't squeeze money out of people."

"You really believe she squeezed money out of somebody?"

"Well, that letter said 'he'd be d——d if she got any more money out of im,' an' what do you take it that means?"

"And you believe she went to London to get some more?"

"I do. She's been worried for weeks past."

"And she received no more money after that letter?"

"Oh, ay—some, but not enough; that's been the trouble. She told me as 'ow the lawyers was a-keepin' back 'er rents."

Taffy did not ask any more questions, and a few minutes later Mrs. Pinder brought in the supper.

Taffy reached London early the next morning, and drove at once to Charing Cross Hospital, after which he went to see an undertaker to arrange for the conveyance of the body to Devonshire.

The inquest had already been held, and a verdict

of accidental death returned. A number of people had witnessed the accident, but no blame was attached to anyone.

He succeeded in getting an interview with the coroner, who gave him such facts as had come out in evidence. The case was very simple. The lady appeared to be alone. She tried to cross the square at the busiest time of day, and, being unused to the ways of London traffic, she got bewildered; seeing a 'bus coming in one direction, she stepped back to avoid it, and was caught by a 'bus travelling in the other direction.

"You say she was quite alone?"

"It would appear so. Other people crossed in front of her, and she attempted to follow, but no one was seen to speak to her."

"And no one claimed any knowledge of her after the accident?"

"No one."

Taffy left the coroner feeling that no secret was to be unearthed in that direction. His next business was to find, if possible, the whereabouts of Smut; but that proved a task beyond his skill. Smut was not in the humour to be seen by any of his old acquaintances, and so he kept away from the places in which they were likely to look for him. He scanned the papers regularly; discovered that Taffy was in town, and had identified the body of his aunt. He smiled grimly when he read the account of the inquest, and concluded that for once, at any rate, he had been in luck's way.

Taffy returned to Devonshire in a more or less perturbed state of mind. In his journey to and fro, as well as while he was in London, he had had a

good deal of time for reflection, and the more he had reflected the more he was convinced that in some way or other Smut was mixed up with his aunt's affairs.

He recalled not only his conversation with Ned, but an earlier conversation with Aunt Jane. She knew at that time where he was, admitted that she heard from him occasionally, and heard of him when she did not hear directly from him.

This, to say the least of it, was perplexing. Why should Aunt Jane keep in touch with him when no one else knew anything of his whereabouts? And if it were really Smut who had supplied her with money, why had he done so? And why had he sworn that he would send her no more? And what power had she over him that she dared go to London to see him?

In the light of the letter Ned had seen it looked like blackmail; but a woman could not blackmail a man unless she were in possession of some secret he did not want disclosed. What was that secret? What had she discovered while she lived at Crowdale?

She had returned after the funeral with five-pound notes in her pocket, and had been receiving money ever since. She had pretended that she had come into a fortune. If that were so, there would be papers in her possession. He and Ned would have to make a thorough search after the funeral.

On his way from the station to Restal he overtook Ezra Bray, who had come into town for his quarterly purchase of leather. His heart quickened immediately. He had heard no news from Milor Hall for nearly a week, and the last news had not been very hopeful. He was almost afraid to ask the question

that was fighting its way to his lips. If Sheila were dead, the world would become grey and sunless again as it had been during those miserable weeks he had believed she was the wife of Smut.

Since that wild night on the downs his heart had been in a strangely turbulent condition—now hopeful, now despairing, now rebellious, now resigned. On the whole, he was not at all sure that he would not be happier if Sheila died. The thought of her marrying someone else was always torture to him, and yet, if she lived, that seemed almost a certainty.

On the other hand, if she died, his faint yet beautiful hope, which glimmered and gloomed like a star in a storm-swept sky, would go out in utter darkness, and there would be no more dream for him as long as life should last. So the tumult in his heart remained and nothing had power to quieten it.

"Well, Ezra, how are you to-day?" he questioned, shaking hands with the shoemaker.

"Oh, pretty middlin'," Ezra answered, with a broad smile. "An' how be you?"

"Very well indeed, thank you. And how is everybody at Milor?"

"Everybody? Oh, well, we'm feelin' a bit more cheerfuller than we did last week."

"Yes?" he questioned eagerly.

"Miss Sheila, they say, is gettin' nicely out of danger, and so everybody is breathin' a bit more easy, as it were."

"That is good," he said, with a deep sigh of relief.

"It's been a terrible narrow squeak," Ezra went on. "Nurses night an' day. Doctor there all the

time. Givin' her hoxygent constant, if you know what that is——"

"Yes, I understand," he said eagerly. "And they think now she is out of danger, do they?"

"That's what they'm sayin'. Of course, she'll 'ave to be terrible careful still, but, by all accounts, she's turned the corner. But what's this we've been hearin' 'bout your aunt? Is it true?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I have just returned from London. The funeral will be at Wiston to-morrow."

"Terrible sad, ain't it?" and Ezra took off his hat and scratched his head.

On the following afternoon Aunt Jane was laid to rest in the quiet churchyard. It was a dark, murky afternoon, with a complaining wind and a shroud of mist on the distant moors. A considerable number of people attended in spite of the weather. They were curious to see the last of the tragedy, and vaguely wondered what Ned would do now that he had no longer a wife to rule him. Already doubts were expressed as to the reality of her fortune. Tradesmen who had been unable to get their money declared that there was something "fishy" about the whole business, and hinted at legal proceedings unless Ned at once settled their accounts.

Ned and Taffy were the only mourners. They waited till the brief service was concluded, and then turned away and together walked slowly and silently home.

After a cup of tea which a neighbour had prepared, they began to overhaul the dead woman's boxes and cupboards. Neither of them had much hope of finding anything of value; nevertheless, they

searched as though there might be diamonds hidden away in secret corners.

Taffy's chief concern was to find something that might throw light on what was to him a perplexing and even painful mystery. The more he had thought about the matter the more he felt convinced that, for some purpose or other, Smut and his aunt had been in collusion, but what that purpose was he could not imagine. All sorts of vague suspicions crossed his mind, most of which he dismissed as quickly as they came, but a residue remained, and robbed him of much sleep in the weeks and months that followed.

It was late in the evening before they gave up the search. Ned groaned loudly.

"I told you 'ow it 'ud be, Taffy," he said, in tones of great distress. "There ain't no fortune, an' I'm up a gum tree."

"She has certainly been very secret over the matter," Taffy answered.

"She might 'ave considered me in case of haccidents," Ned grumbled.

"She has carefully destroyed every hint and clue," Taffy said reflectively. "I wonder why, now?"

"Jist like a woman," Ned snarled. "It ain't generous. It's mean, I call it."

"Don't say unkind things, uncle," Taffy said quietly. "She did not expect to be killed, you know."

"But the question is, wot be I a-goin' to do? She's left me without a sixpence."

"A man who has health and strength and a trade in his fingers is never helpless," was the reply. "You will have to go back to your work again."

"I'll wed another woman wot 'as got a bit of brass, that's wot I'll do," Ned said savagely. "I'll do it to spite 'er," and he brought his hard fist down on the table with a bang.

Taffy remained with Ned during the night, and on the following morning returned to Restal.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BACK FROM THE SHADOWS

SHEILA came slowly back from life's borderland. She had wandered so far among the shadows, and had become so infinitely weary, that she had no desire to return. To fall asleep and wake up in a brighter and better country—that was her desire. Outside, the autumn winds moaned in the bare trees through all the days and nights, and nature seemed only a reflection of human life. A few bright days, a gleam of sunshine now and then, a few flowers blooming with difficulty here and there; but, in the main, grey skies and bitter winds and cold, pitiless hail and rain.

She thought of Taffy a good deal, but without pain or regret. They seemed to stand on different islands, with a dark, relentless sea rolling between. For a night and a day her heart had beat wildly at the memory of his words, though there had been blanks even then—periods of delirium when the real world was blotted out, and a strange, weird world, with horrible shapes in it, took its place; then there followed a period of almost complete unconsciousness. How long it lasted she did not know, and she did not trouble to ask. Now she was just conscious that she was alive, but that was all. People came and went, stood by her side for a few moments, and passed into the outer shadows. She heard the murmur of voices now and then, but she did not

know what was said, had no desire to know. She hardly knew who she was, or where she was, or how she came to be lying so still without power to move.

A little later she became more sensitive to sounds and to the presence of people coming and going. She heard again the voice of the wind in the bare trees, but it was so faint and far away that it had no power to disturb her, and awoke in her brain no memory of the past.

Later still she began to distinguish faces. She recognised the doctor, and smiled feebly when he bent over her. She knew when Peggy came into the room, and followed her with her eyes; and, finally, she found herself with her arms round her father's neck, and tears running down her cheeks.

So little by little she came back from the borderland, and with many halts and backward glances. Sometimes for a whole day she made no progress, and the doctor's face would cloud with anxiety. She had no will of her own in the matter. She made no effort to live, was quite indifferent whether she got better or no.

If left to unskilful hands, she would have slipped out of life even now; but trained nurses were in attendance night and day. What her own will lacked they supplied; every symptom was watched and every sign of weakness met.

She was very patient, and took the small doses of nutriment without a murmur. It rather worried her to have people constantly about—people who were strangers to her and whose names she did not know—but it was too much trouble to complain or even ask questions.

She took no count of days. Autumn passed into

the cold embrace of winter, and when at length she was able to sit up in bed and look out of the window, it was upon a world hard and black with frost.

With returning strength her brain began to get busy again. Memory unlocked all its doors and cupboards. Unconsciously, her thoughts wandered back into the past. She followed the steps she had taken until she found herself on the top of Gold-worthy Downs, with the blackness of night about her and a storm raging with such severity that she could not stand against it.

She remembered, too, why she had taken that particular walk. She had wanted something that would answer to an emotion in her own heart. What that something was she could not define. It might be the sight of someone in whom she was greatly interested; it might be just to wander along the paths that he had made familiar. It might be only to look down on the farmhouse in which he had once lived.

It all came back to her now. She had been restless and heartsore. The moment she had returned to Milor Hall she wanted to see Taffy. It seemed as though he were part—and the most important part—of the place. In London she did not miss him. There was nothing in the big city with which she associated him; but in Milor he was the centre around which everything revolved.

She did not realise how much she wanted him, how much he had become to her, until she returned with her uncle. Directly she came in sight of the village her heart began to beat with hope and expectation. The sight of his face would have completed

her satisfaction, for she loved Milor Hall and all its surroundings.

The morning after her return she loitered through the village and walked in the direction of Crowdale. In the afternoon, as she looked up at the tors, they seemed to draw her as with a magnet. It was a bracing day for a walk, with gleams of bright sunshine. She remembered that the way had not seemed long at all nor the hill steep; she remembered, too, that there was a thought in her heart that he might be impelled in the same direction and by a similar impulse.

Her pale cheeks grew red as she thought of all this; but not with shame—there was nothing to be ashamed of. She could afford to be quite frank and honest with herself. Taffy Longton might be poor and the son of ordinary and commonplace people, but he was not ordinary or commonplace himself. She had met no one among all her acquaintances whom she so much admired. His courage, his integrity, his gentleness, his patience, his faith, appealed to all that was best in her. The woman whom he chose to stand by his side and help him to fight life's battle ought to be a proud woman.

Taffy's social position had no place in her thoughts. There was no snobbishness in her nature. The man was so much greater than his circumstances that the mere question of worldly position dropped out of sight.

Here was a man to be respected and admired; a man who made no show or pretence; a man who had faith in himself and in God; who never prated about religion, but lived it; who did the work that lay nearest his hand and never complained; who had

had no university training, and yet was a gentleman through every fibre of his being.

She contrasted him with Smut unconsciously. Each had talked to her about the other, and yet how widely different their spirit; how great and generous Taffy had been, how small the other. Smut had all the ease and polish of the ordinary society young man, and he had nothing else.

Taffy had all the grace and charm that sprang from sincerity, and the nobleness and beauty of a nature bent on doing the right. In truth, Taffy was the gentleman because he had the gentle and chivalrous spirit. Smut was only commonplace, in spite of the veneer, and would never be anything else.

It came to her with something like a shock that Taffy had taken such a hold upon her heart and life. She traced the feeling back to its beginnings. She recalled their first meeting, when she gave him sixpence for fastening her saddle-girth. She remembered the curious thrill she experienced when she discovered he was wearing the sixpence on his watchchain. She had watched him with growing interest ever since, and somehow—she hardly knew how—he had come to be her ideal—her man. She would rather be his friend than the friend of any other man she had ever met.

So step by step she followed the track of their separate lives until they met under the shelter of the tor that wild, tempestuous night. She was not at all surprised that he came to her—it was in the nature of things, a part of the eternal order.

Yet how she had thrilled at his coming. How proud she had been of his strength and courage.

With what delight she had watched him make a fire. He was her *man*—her representative of the highest and noblest type.

She was not at all surprised when he began to talk to her and tell her of his love; that also was in the nature of things. It was the story for which she had been longing unconsciously for months, and now, when his lips were opened and the hot, passionate words came pouring forth, she listened entranced—it was the music for which her heart had been longing, and so beautiful was it, so ravishing the strains that she would not break in upon it by any word of her own. She would wait until he had done speaking, and then how gladly, how joyfully, she would reply.

It seemed to her very far-away now, as she sat propped up with pillows staring wistfully out of the window. And she had never answered him; and he did not know—he did not know.

She had been ill for weeks, so they told her, ill and unconscious; and he had never come to the house—never inquired. Did he care so much after all? or did he misinterpret her silence? Surely he must have seen the light in her eyes and the look of rapture upon her face. Perhaps he did not. There was only the light of the fire, and he was very diffident, very uncertain of himself, and the other men came all too soon.

Of the journey home she remembered very little, and since then there had been darkness and silence and uncertainty.

When she could get near the windows she used to look away through the bare trees to where glimpses

of the main road could be seen. Once the colour flamed into her pale cheeks, though no one knew the reason. A solitary horseman was riding slowly past and looking intently toward the house. She did not love the winter, and yet she was thankful at this moment that the trees were bare. Constantly the brown branches came in the way, but her eyes, sharpened by love and long watching, could not be mistaken. It was Taffy she saw, and her heart leaped into her throat.

Would he come to the house, as a neighbour might, to inquire? She strained her eyes as he rode slowly onward toward the village. He passed the lodge gates, and was lost to sight. The colour faded slowly from her face, and she fell to dreaming and speculating.

After that the days went very slowly. She would sit for an hour or two near the window, with her elbow on the arm of the chair and her chin in the cup of her hand, and all the time her eyes would be on the strip of road that was visible through the trees.

She did not see him again for many days, but she pictured him constantly. She was not at all surprised at her love for him. She accepted it as the most natural thing in the world, the most natural and the most wonderful. It made life a new thing for her and the world a new place. Nothing could ever be again as it had been. This wonderful thing that had taken possession of her had changed everything. She was not sure that she was happier. Along with the new joy had come a new pain. Her heart was full of this great, beautiful, unselfish love; and yet somewhere in her being was an empty place,

and the ache of it was terrible. She wanted to see Taffy, and look in his clear honest eyes and tell him, tell him without reserve. Oh, what a joy it would be to talk to him again!

She fell to idealising him as the days passed on. She did not mind that he was poor; that was nothing. Indeed, she was rather proud of it. It seemed far nobler to be poor and earn one's own bread than live upon what had been earned by others. She compared Taffy with Smut again. Smut would do nothing just because he was not compelled; his money made him idle; he had no spur to enterprise; he grew daily more self-indulgent—that was clear to everybody who saw much of him—and daily more blind and indifferent to the true purpose of life.

But Taffy had kept his armour bright by constant effort. Taffy was a *man*, and her eyes glowed as she pictured him—strong, patient, self-reliant.

By Christmas she was able to take short walks in front of the house. The weather, fortunately, was mild and sunny, and this favoured her getting out of doors.

When she was strong enough she walked as far as the lodge, and sometimes she waited so long at the gate that she ran great risks of getting cold again. There were a good many passers along the high road, especially on Saturday, which was market day at Blakeney; but though she often strolled as far as the gate, and often waited, straining wistful eyes along the road, Taffy never came by when she was there. From a distance she had seen him three times, but never near.

One bright day near the end of the year she got as far as the village, and had a little talk with Ezra

Bray. Ezra's eyes grew dim at the sight of her—she looked so fragile—and yet he fancied a new beauty had come into her face.

"And 'ow be 'ee, Miss?" Ezra questioned, wiping his hands on his apron. "I be main glad to see 'ee again."

"Oh, I am getting quite strong again," she said, with a smile. "And how are you, Ezra, and how is everybody in Milor?"

"Oh, we'm all about brave to middlin', I reckon. But you've had a terrible narrow squeak, they tell me."

"I think I have been rather ill," she answered, still smiling. "But I have never thanked you yet, Ezra, for coming in search of me."

"Oh, that was nothing. We only follow'd the light wi' the wind at our backs. Besides, the storm was luffing a bit by the time we reached the top. It was Taffy Longton who did it all. Oh, he's a brick, is Taffy!"

"Oh, yes, of course, I owe most to him. I have had no opportunity of thanking him yet."

"He doesn't want no thanks, doesn't Taffy. He was delighted that he found you."

"Yes."

"But he was terrible knocked over when you got so bad."

"What makes you think that, Ezra?"

"Oh, anybody could see it as knows Taffy. He ain't a man to say much, but those wonderful eyes of his, Miss, tell tales to them as 'as sense enough to see."

She laughed pleasantly and good humouredly, and the warm blood stained rosy-red her neck and

face. "At any rate, Mr. Longton has never called to inquire," she said lightly.

"Not at the Hall—very likely, Miss. Taffy wouldn't care to go round to the back door, like the rest of us——"

"Go round to the back door?" she interrupted. "I should think not, indeed——"

"Besides," he interposed hastily, "there was a little note posted on the gate most days."

"And have you seen Mr. Longton lately?"

"Oh, ay. He dropped in for a crack wi' me a few days ago; but he's kept terrible busy. He was asking if I'd seen you an' if you hadn't got quite strong again."

"And was he quite well?"

"I think so. Taffy ain't the sort to complain. I reckon he's been worried a goodish bit 'bout his aunt's affairs, but he don't say much."

"That was a very sad accident, was it not? But I must be going now. Remember me to Mrs. Bray," and she tripped lightly across the road in the direction of the Hall.

A week later she and her father left England for Egypt. The doctors insisted that she must on no account face the rigours of an English spring; by another winter, with care, she would be as strong as she had ever been.

She left Milor Hall very reluctantly. There was no other place in the world she liked so well; moreover, she dreaded being in a foreign place, particularly as her father would not be able to remain with her all the time.

And then, to make matters worse, she had never come face to face with Taffy. She had watched for

him and waited for him in vain. He had passed through Milor a dozen times since her convalescence, but it seemed as though the fates had conspired to keep them apart.

That he loved her she had very little doubt. She was quite sure that she loved him, and yet it seemed to her that they might just drift apart and perhaps never come together again. One little word—one look, even—might link them together for life; but there was no chance of that little word being spoken, that look given.

The day before they started she spent mostly out of doors. She walked the entire length of the village, walked in the other direction almost to Crowdale; but Taffy was busy in quite another place, and there was no little bird to whisper to him that the woman he loved more than all else on earth was waiting for him and longing for one more word from his lips.

He heard with outward calm the news that Sheila and her father had gone to Egypt, and would not be back again till May, when she would again take up her residence in London. And yet the news was like a cold douche on a winter's day. He felt as though he had again reached the end of all things. While he could hope he could strive, but if hope died what was the use of striving, and how could hope live when there was nothing with which to feed it? The fiercest fire would die out when the fuel was exhausted. She had left him no little word, no look, no smile. She had not even expressed a word of thanks.

He had given her opportunities enough in all conscience—so he believed. He had ridden past

Milor Hall far oftener than his business called him. He had loitered in the village talking with Ezra or the landlord of "The Milor Arms" again and again, but she had never once shown her face. She had timed her visits to the village so as to avoid him.

There was nothing for him but to accept his fate with the utmost courage he could command. She was evidently not for him in any earthly sense, and yet, perhaps in the highest sense of all, she was his. She had taught him what love meant, taught him to dream, to aspire; she had opened to his vision realms that had been closed to him before; she had given to life a new meaning, and clothed the world with a fresh beauty. He was a better man for knowing her and loving her. The vision of her goodness and beauty had made it impossible that he could ever stoop to worthless things; having seen the best, he must fain live up to it, and try, by patience and self-conquest, to be worthy of his ideal.

So he took up the burden of his toil again bravely and patiently, and no one guessed what he had hoped for or what he had lost.

CHAPTER XXIX

SUMMER-TIME

TAFFY was kept busy during the winter and spring. His business grew in spite of himself—not rapidly, but steadily and uniformly. Blakeney became the clearing house of an ever-widening district. He was not ambitious to make money or to be at the head of a big concern. But he loved his work, enjoyed the constant change that his work entailed, and was never happier than when negotiating some slightly hazardous undertaking.

Every few weeks his business called him to London. He was no longer appalled by its bigness or frightened by its keen business methods. Experience had given him confidence in himself. He knew what he wanted, knew what he could do and what he could not do. He was not timid, but on the other hand he was never reckless. He was fond of speculation, but he always speculated within the limits of his resources.

So gradually he built up a reputation, not only for keen business qualities, but for absolute integrity.

Every time he went to London he made an attempt to find Smut, but always without success. Smut appeared to have passed out of sight as completely as Aunt Jane, and with the passing of the one disappeared the other. Taffy searched for him in every place likely and unlikely, but he could gain no tidings of him in any quarter. The great whirlpool

of London had swallowed him up. His name was not to be found even in the directory.

- He puzzled himself constantly as to the meaning of this strange disappearance. Why did Smut never write to him? Did marriage so change a man that he forgot all his old friends, or had something happened, something that made him ashamed of himself or of his friends?

Taffy was not at all easy in his mind. Suspicions had been awakened at the time of Aunt Jane's death that would not be allayed. He did his best to dismiss them from his attention, but they stuck to him like burrs, and as the days and months passed away, and he could get no news of Smut, they hardened into the consistency of facts. He became more and more convinced that Smut had not prospered. A man who was doing well, who was winning in life's battle, gaining honours, or wealth, or distinction, could not hide himself if he would, and would not if he could.

Smut had been a proud man, not to say a vain one. He liked to pose as a man of distinction. If he ever did anything noteworthy his friends always heard of it, and he was never able to keep the fact to himself that he had independent means.

Hence this persistent silence was ominous. A man did not deliberately keep himself in the background for nothing.

As spring advanced, however, Taffy worried himself less and less about Smut and thought more about the home-coming of Sheila. He had never succeeded in banishing her from his mind, and, if he knew it, had never ceased to hope. Like the Pole Star, hope was always in its place, fixed, undeviating. It might be hidden by clouds and smoke and fog for months

on the stretch, but it was always there, and now and then, when the clouds were rifted for a moment, he would see it twinkling.

He tried to laugh at himself one day in May as he journeyed to London. The woods and hedgerows looked lovely in their fresh young green. The sunlight flashed on the rippling pools and streams. The sky was a perfect dome of blue, and all the way, to the click of the wheels, his heart kept saying, "Sheila is coming home."

What difference her home-coming could make to him neither he nor anybody else could comprehend. He had heard nothing of her since she went away. He presumed she was still alive, or it would be known in Milor; but whether she was well or ill, sad or gay, he had never been able to discover. The only information he could get was that she would not return to England before May, and that she would spend the summer in London.

On the face of it there was very little in that to quicken any hope he might cherish, and yet he knew he hoped in spite of everything. It was in vain he called himself names, in vain he argued the question on a logical basis. He loved her, and love laughs at logic.

He spent three days in London. Two of them he devoted exclusively to business; the third he spent in seeing the sights and wandering about the streets. He argued that if Sheila had spent nearly five months abroad, she would be eager to see the London shops when she came home, and as the weather was fine she would be specially tempted to get into the shopping streets.

He felt rather disconcerted when he wandered up

Regent Street and thence up Oxford Street. It seemed to him as though all London had turned out on a gigantic shop gaze. He had a difficulty sometimes in elbowing his way through the crowd—and such a crowd. Ninety per cent. at least were women.

As he fought his way back through Bond Street he reflected seriously on the woman problem of England, and wondered how it would be solved and whether if left alone it would solve itself.

He was very tired when night came, and told himself that he had spent the day on a fool's errand, and that he deserved his aches for his pains.

He did not deny to himself that he was terribly disappointed. If he knew where she lived he would have gone and stood opposite the house and watched the windows on the off-chance of getting a glimpse of her face.

He returned home next day a little chastened in spirit but by no means in despair. He told himself that he would be certain to meet Sheila again sooner or later. He might not cross her path in London—London was such an easy place for people to hide in; but she would soon be finding her way to Milor Hall—it was second home to her; nay, it was first home for that matter. She was happier there than with her stepmother.

The days and weeks, however, dragged away very slowly. He was impatient to know the best or the worst. He admitted that the chances were against him. Indeed, he grew miserable when he argued the question from what might be called a common-sense point of view. The probabilities seemed a hundred to one that she would say no, or if she did not say it, that her people would say it for her.

He pictured Sir John growing red as a turkey-cock and crying, "What presumption! The impertinence of the man. Did anyone ever hear of such a thing?" He could hardly help laughing to himself when he thought of all the consternation that would follow if by any chance Sheila should favour his suit.

So the days passed away and he grew more and more eager and impatient. In June he was in London again, and for a somewhat longer stay. He put Smut completely out of his mind. He thought of no one but Sheila. He resolved to go into Regent Street every afternoon. He had seen her there before, and it seemed more likely he would meet her there than anywhere else.

It is the unexpected, however, that happens. He met her one morning in Regent's Park, where she was taking a constitutional alone. He was not thinking of her at the moment. It was so early that very few people were abroad. He had come out partly to get an appetite for breakfast and partly because he could not sleep. That he would meet anyone he knew was the last thought to cross his mind. He was walking with eyes upon the ground listening to the thrushes in the trees. He felt as though he were miles away in the country. The roar of the streets had not become audible yet.

Suddenly he looked up as a light footstep sounded near him. In a moment his whole body was tense, his eyes flashed, the blood leaped to his cheeks in a burning torrent.

"Miss Leyland!" he said almost in a gasp.

She recognised him in a moment and came forward with outstretched hand and eager face.

"Mr. Longton?" she said in a tone of questioning

surprise, as if she would have said, "Who in the world would have expected to see you here?"

"You are quite well again?" he said a little stiffly and awkwardly. It was the only thing he could think of to say. But her face bore evidence of complete recovery.

"Oh, yes, thank you," she answered brightly. "I never felt better in my life. And you?"

"I am very well."

"And are you remaining long in London?"

"Two or three days. I come up every few weeks on business. I have been hoping I might meet you."

"Yes?" she questioned timidly, and a warmer tinge of colour spread itself slowly over her face.

"It seems a very very long time since you went away——"

She hesitated for a moment. Then she said, "Are you going this way? We might walk together." Her heart was beating very fast, and she was afraid her face might betray her if she allowed him to look straight at her.

"If you will permit me," he said almost in a whisper, and he turned and walked by her side.

For some distance they walked in silence, but it was a silence that was eloquent to both. Every now and then she glanced timidly up into his face and thought how well and handsome he looked. His face was aglow, his eyes bright, his skin clear, his step firm and steady. There was nothing of the weakling about him. She was of full height herself and well proportioned; but he seemed to tower head and shoulders above her.

He was well dressed, too, as though he had put himself into the hands of a West-End tailor.

Her heart beat very fast as she waited for him to reopen the conversation. He seemed in no hurry, however, to begin. A little way ahead there were some chairs beneath the trees, and toward these he directed his steps.

For himself he felt that the supreme moment of his life had come—the moment to which he had looked forward through long years of hope and mis-giving. He felt very acutely, as he had felt a thousand times before, the inequality of their social position. It seemed unfair and unreasonable to expect anyone in her station in life to share his humble lot. She had been used to luxuries all her life, she had moved in the most cultivated circles. She had never known the pinch of poverty or the burden of care, and he was going to ask her to share Restal with him.

Had it been any other man he would have laughed at him, or rebuked him for his presumption. But love such as his took no account of social inequalities and rode rough-shod over society conventions. He was a man and she was a woman, and, in the name of God who made them both, he had a right to love her, and, if she were willing, to make her his.

He was greatly heartened by the way she had met him. She could not have forgotten that night on the downs. She would not expect him to act as though that confession of love had never been made.

They reached a seat at length and sat down. The shade of the trees was grateful after the hot sun. The cool morning breeze sang softly above their heads. For a moment he prodded the green turf with the ferrule of his walking stick. Then, without turning his head, he said :

"Our last meeting was under very different circumstances."

• "Yes—very—— I wanted very much to thank you, but you gave me no opportunity." She spoke slowly, almost hesitatingly.

"You blamed me, no doubt, for taking advantage of your unprotected position; but I could not help myself. It seemed cowardly when I looked at the matter afterwards. I have no excuse to offer but my love. When a man loves a woman as I love you, when he has kept silent for months and even years until it was torture to be silent any longer—Well, I am only human. I cannot help loving you. God knows I have tried. But every fibre of my being loves you and cries out for you——"

She glanced up at him for a moment, and he saw that her eyes were wet, but she did not speak.

"She pities me," was his thought—"only pities." But he went on talking as though he had not seen her glance.

"I am not insensible, believe me, of the social gulf that lies between us. I am acutely conscious of my presumption. But there is another side. Circumstances are not—everything. I am a man, with a man's rights—and I have thought—— But what does it matter what I have thought?" and he prodded the green sod again with a gesture of impatience.

She looked at him for a moment and then said gently, "Please tell me what you have thought."

"What good will it do?" and he shrugged his shoulders unconsciously. "And yet, as you ask me, I will tell you. I have thought that if a woman be a true woman she will look at the man, not at his

circumstances; will value him for what he is, not for what he has; will prefer struggle and even hardship with the man she loves, rather than idleness and sloth with a man for whom she does not care."

He stopped suddenly and looked away across the park.

"Well?" she questioned timidly after a few moments.

"Such a woman I have believed you to be," he went on as though there had been no break. "And it came to me—through my own presumption, perhaps—but it came to me that since I loved you so much—since every hope and dream of my life was bound up with you—that God meant you for me—that we were twin souls. And if that were so, there would be something in you that would respond to the passion that turns my blood to flame. But for that hope—nay, that belief—I would have been silent to-day. If I am mistaken in all this"—and he fingered nervously the sixpence that hung on his chain—"if I have awakened in your heart no response—if this dream of a Divine ordering is all an illusion, and I am doomed to love you when you cannot love me in return—well—I shall have to face the issue as best I can."

He turned and looked at her calmly and steadily. She met his gaze frankly for a moment, and then her eyes filled again.

"Taffy," she whispered shyly, "do you love me so very much?"

"More than life," he answered; and his heart thumped against his side as though it would burst through. She had called him "Taffy," and that meant heaven.

"And you believe that God meant us for each other?"

"I do!" he cried.

"Dear heart, I also believe it," and she laid her hand in his.

"You mean it, Sheila?" and his eyes seemed to devour her.

"Mean it? Oh, Taffy, I have loved you for years."

Neither of them rightly remembered what happened after that. They had the wider spaces of the park all to themselves. Only the birds and the whispering leaves listened to what they said. But what they said was what lovers have always said since the world began.

Sheila was the first to come back from dreamland. "Father will think I am lost," she said, rising suddenly to her feet.

"And what does Sheila think?" he questioned, a happy smile lighting up his face.

"Sheila thinks she has been found," she answered, and she allowed him to kiss her again.

"And may I call and see your father to-day?"

"No, not to-day, dearest. I must have time to prepare him for your coming."

"You think he will be very angry?"

"I am afraid he will. And, of course, Uncle John and Peggy will be furious. Do you know Cousin Peggy always feared this?"

"No, I did not know."

"Back in the old days before your accident, and much more after, she used to read me, oh, such lessons! She thought I was much too fond of your company."

"And were you really fond of my company, sweetheart?"

She laughed brightly. "You men are very blind," she said.

"But you were not blind, Sheila? You knew? You understood?"

"You should not ask such point-blank questions," she laughed.

"Oh, this is only the beginning," he protested. "I shall ask you thousands of questions. You had better prepare yourself. Don't you think you are taking great risks?"

"Risks?" she questioned with a fond, happy light in her eyes.

"I am only a poor man, you know, and Restal is such a little box of a place."

"As if that mattered. Shall I not have you? Oh, you foolish boy! have you forgotten what you have been saying to me this morning? It is not I who take risks, but you. Think how little I know about housekeeping. Oh, but I shall learn, Taffy," and her eyes sparkled again."

"It seems all too good to be true," he said, gazing fondly into her bright, happy eyes.

"Now, dear, I must go," she answered, "or father will be getting quite alarmed."

"And am I not to see you again until tomorrow?" he questioned dolefully.

"Why, of course you may. Suppose we have tea together. Oh, I know such lovely places!" And then, after a few more whispered words they tore themselves apart.

They met in the afternoon at Oxford Circus and got into a taxi and drove to Kensington Gardens

and had tea under the wide-spreading elms. Taffy had no idea that there was such a place in London. "Oh, this is just lovely!" he exclaimed, and he gazed fondly at the girl by his side.

Sheila was attired in simple white relieved by a pink band round her waist and a bow at her throat of the same colour. He had never seen her look so beautiful, so radiant—never seen her eyes glow with such a wonderful light.

"You are happy, little girl?" he whispered.

"Happy? Oh, Taffy, I am more than happy. I never knew before that it could be so good to live."

And yet that night she sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XXX

AN INTERVIEW

SHEILA had never seen her father so angry before. The truth came out unexpectedly. She had had no intention of telling him of her meetings with Taffy. Taffy himself would call on the morrow and explain everything. She was supremely happy when she returned home in the cool of the evening. The day had been one of unclouded delight. Her hope and dream had come true, and all the world was a fairy-land of beauty.

There was no lingering wonder or doubt in her mind as to whether she had done the right thing. It never occurred to her that she had taken a downward step in the social scale, that she might have to give up some of her friends and acquaintances, and perhaps be ostracised by a few people who were socially important.

She loved Taffy, and he loved her, and nothing else mattered. To be with him, to be conscious of his protection, to hear his voice, to catch his smile and see the look of undying affection in his deep, honest eyes—those things meant life and heaven.

The heart could not be satisfied with money and fine dresses and social functions. Such things had their place and value, no doubt, but they could give no lasting peace. The heart hungered for something more, something better and nobler, and only when love found it did it begin to live.

She felt as though all the flowers in the window-boxes nodded to her and smiled as she passed. She wondered if there were another girl in all London as happy as she.

Several times during dinner her father looked at her with a curious questioning light in his eyes. She wondered if he had already seen Taffy, or if it was her happy tell-tale face that was revealing the truth. She hoped it was the former. It hardly occurred to her that her father might say "No" to her lover's request. How could he? Taffy was so brave, so handsome, so good, that he was bound to win all hearts. Lover-like, she imagined that he would appeal to other people just as he did to her, and that everybody would see in him the splendid qualities she saw.

It was late in the evening when her father asked her how she had spent the day. They were alone together in the library. He had not meant to be inquisitive, but he was interested in all the doings of his daughter.

"You have not seen him?" she questioned kindly.

She saw him start, and instantly her face became crimson; but it was too late now to draw back.

He drew himself up with a look of suspicion in his eyes. "You have something to tell me," he said. "You seem excited and scarcely like yourself this evening."

"I am excited, father," she said, laughing and blushing; "but please wait until to-morrow."

"No, I prefer to know to-night," he said severely. A hundred vague fears and misgivings rushed through his mind all at once. He was not altogether

ignorant of the young farmer of Milor. Peggy had told him of Sheila's interest in him. He knew, too, that it was he who had found her on the downs, and there had been a vague fear in his mind for months that something might happen if Sheila returned to Milor Hall.

But this particular fear vanished almost as soon as it came. Sheila was not at Milor Hall; she was in London. Also, she had not seen the young farmer since that night on the downs. Hence it was not at all likely that there was any cause for anxiety in that direction; yet that something important had happened was quite evident from Sheila's manner.

"Come, out with it, little girl," he went on in a tone that was a little less hard and peremptory. "I see that something is worrying you."

"No, I am not worried at all," she answered, turning her face away to hide the blushes. "I am only very happy."

"But what has made you happy?"

There was no help for it now. So she came and knelt at his knee and hid her face in her hands and told him.

He listened in stony silence. If she had looked up she would have seen the cloud darkening on his face every moment; but she did not look up, and in the innocence of her heart she prattled on, telling him everything.

He waited until she had finished, and then said sternly :

"Get up. I want to talk to you."

She sprang to her feet in a moment. She knew by the tone of his voice that he was angry, and the joy of her heart gave place to a great fear. She stood

before him erect, resolute, her eyes no longer soft and wistful, but full of a sudden fire.

“The thing is impossible,” he said fiercely and angrily—“absolutely, ludicrously impossible!—A country lout—a village ignoramus!”

“You have not seen him, father,” she said eagerly. “Wait until you have seen him.”

“I do not want to see him,” he stormed. “I know enough of him. Great heavens, has it come to this?” and he launched out in such a tirade as Sheila did not think possible from his lips.

She felt too confounded to reply. She sank into an easy chair and hid her face in her hands.

Robert Leyland felt that he had a stern and righteous duty to perform. It was not a case for gentle measures. A girl of Sheila’s type would have to be dealt with firmly. He would have to stop the evil at once, and not let it go a single step further. A viper of this kind in the social garden was not to be scotched merely, it would have to be killed outright.

When he had succeeded in reducing Sheila to silence and to tears he felt that at least he had made a good beginning. He would complete the task on the following day, when Taffy appeared on the scene.

Taffy arrived at an early hour. He was impatient of delay, though a little doubtful as to the kind of reception he would get. He was shown at once into the library, where Mr. Leyland was waiting for him. They had not seen each other before, and Mr. Leyland was evidently in no hurry to greet his visitor. He appeared to be finishing a letter, and sat with his back to the door.

Taffy had time to recover himself. Also he got a clue as to what awaited him. Mr. Leyland turned at length slowly in his chair and then raised his eyes indifferently to his visitor.

"Great Scott ! I have been making a mistake," was the thought that flashed through his brain. "Who is this, I wonder ? I hope he will not think I have been rude."

He rose quickly to his feet and pulled nervously at his grey moustache.

"I—beg your pardon," he said aloud. "I was expecting—ah !—someone else. Will you not be seated ?"

"Thank you, but for the moment I prefer to stand."

Robert Leyland felt somewhat snubbed ; felt also that it served him right.

"As you will," he said nervously, "but I am afraid I did not catch your name."

"My name is Longton," Taffy replied quietly.

"Longton ?—you—Longton !" Mr. Leyland almost gasped, and he turned and walked across the room and then came back again.

"You expected me ?" Taffy said quietly.

"Well, yes, I did. Yes, that is so. My daughter explained certain matters to me last night."

"I am glad," Taffy interjected with a sigh of relief.

Robert Leyland was undeniably impressed in his visitor's favour. He had been taken completely off his guard. He had expected somebody totally different in manner and appearance. This man was no country clown. As far as outward appearances went, at any rate, he was a gentleman, and he was bound

to treat him as such. The speeches he had composed during the morning did not fit the occasion. He had no intention of beating a retreat from the position he had taken up with Sheila, but on the other hand he could not abruptly and scornfully dismiss his visitor as he had intended to do.

For several moments he pulled at his moustache and frowned. He was at a loss for suitable words. Then he said abruptly :

"I think we need not waste time over the matter, Mr.—ah—Mr. Longton. I told my daughter last night that the thing was absolutely impossible."

"And why impossible, may I ask?"

"For a dozen reasons, sir; for a dozen reasons. I really must decline to go into details."

"But you discussed them with Miss Leyland?"

"I did."

"And she agrees with you?"

"I do not say that. Girls are foolish and romantic, and often blind to their best interests. And will you allow me to say this, sir? You had no right to make love to my daughter. I regard it as an impertinence, sir—an unwarrantable liberty!"

"Pardon me," Taffy interrupted with heat, "I made love to your daughter honourably. I have loved her for years. I discovered yesterday that—well—that she is not indifferent to me——"

"Not indifferent! Bah! A silly fancy of a silly and inexperienced girl," and Robert Leyland drew himself up to his full height and looked his fiercest.

"Miss Leyland is of age, I think, and may be allowed to know her own mind," Taffy observed quietly.

"She knows my mind, at any rate," was the

retort, "and you know it also; that should be sufficient for both of you."

"By no means," Taffy answered with a smile: "Your opinion—in so far as it is a reasoned one—is deserving of respect, of course. But we really cannot allow you, or anyone else, to decide all our future for us."

"You mean that you will defy me!" and the light of a growing anger blazed in his eyes.

"I mean that I cannot accept your dictation. This is a matter that concerns me vitally. It means more to me than you probably can guess. My hope and happiness are at stake. And if your daughter remains of the same mind, not even the opposition of a parent will be allowed to separate us."

"But she will not remain of the same mind, sir. Do you hear me? She will *not* remain of the same mind. I have quite made up my mind on this matter!"

Taffy smiled unconsciously and Robert Leyland was quick to notice it, and his eyes blazed more fiercely than before.

"You think I am to be trifled with, do you?" he almost hissed. "You smile as though my authority were of no account. I tell you I am in earnest, and mean what I say!"

"I do not doubt it for a moment," Taffy answered back in a tone of defiance. "But I also am in earnest and mean what I say, and I tell you frankly that I intend to marry your daughter."

"Without my consent?"

"Either with or without. I suppose it does not matter much in the long run."

"Not matter much! You talk like a madman!"

Do you think my daughter would dream of marrying you if I opposed the match?"

"I think it is possible she might."

"Then you do not know her, and you do not know me. I tell you my daughter will not consent to marry you."

"But she has consented—that is——"

"With my approval! Exactly! But, you see, I don't approve, and that settles the matter."

"Oh, no. It does not settle the matter at all. In a matter of this kind you are not the final authority. I want to see Miss Leyland. If she refuses to marry me without your consent, then, of course, I must bow to her decision."

"You want to see her alone? Impossible, sir."

Taffy laughed scornfully. "You will hardly object, I suppose, to my seeing her here in your presence?"

"What is the good?"

"I think it is due to me, at any rate."

Robert Leyland hesitated for a moment, then went and touched a bell.

"Send Miss Leyland here," he said to the servant. Then he went and leaned on the mantelpiece and waited.

In a few moments the door was pushed open, and Sheila came shyly into the room. She glanced up at Taffy and smiled pathetically, and he saw that she had been crying. She did not attempt to shake hands, however, and for a moment his heart misgave him.

"Sheila," Robert Leyland said sternly, "you know this young man, of course, and why he has come. I have told him in the plainest possible

language that I refuse to give my consent to what he asks. I have told him, further, that you will never consent to marry him without my permission. Is not that so ? ”

Sheila felt that the eyes of both men were upon her and she grew very pale. She glanced first at Taffy—a brave, assuring glance—and the colour came rushing back again to her face. Then she turned to her father, and her eyes were calm and fearless.

“No, father,” she answered. “I have never said that to you.”

“But you will say it now ? ” he demanded.

“No,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation, and she went and stood beside her lover. “Taffy and I have plighted our troth.”

For a few moments Robert Leyland seemed too astonished for words. That Sheila had a will of her own he knew; but that she would definitely and openly defy him was what he was not prepared for.

“And I am to understand that you defy me ? ” he gasped at length—“that you prefer this—this——”

“Please, father, don’t use any harsh or unkind words,” she interrupted, and she moved a step or two toward him. “You do not know Taffy. If you did you would admire him. Go down to Blakeney and ask the people who know him. Some day you will be proud that I am loved by so good a man.”

He held up his hand deprecatingly, then turned away with a gesture of helplessness and despair.

For several moments there was silence in the room. Taffy looked into the clear eyes of the brave, sweet girl by his side and felt himself the happiest man on

earth. No words passed between them, but love understood and interpreted the silence.

Robert Leyland turned at length with a sudden and eager movement. "This interview had better end," he said shortly, and he walked to the door and threw it open.

Sheila held out her hand to Taffy as he passed and smiled. She was no longer afraid of her father.

Taffy grasped her hand, and with one eager look into her swimming eyes passed out of the room.

Robert Leyland closed the door softly and came back again to the mantelpiece.

"Will you not think better of this, Sheila?" he said brokenly.

"Why should I, father?" she asked quietly. "What have you against him?"

"He hasn't a penny to bless himself with—a fortune hunter—an intruder——"

"No, father, he is no fortune hunter. I don't suppose he knows I have anything, and he would not trouble to ask. Besides, he has energy and ability, and can make his own way in the world."

"Oh, I don't deny that he may be a very excellent young man in his way. In his own circle he would probably shine, but he should keep there."

"A good old conservative doctrine, no doubt," she said with a smile; "but a little bit antiquated, don't you think? Taffy will make his own circle and choose his own path."

"I wish he had not chosen you, or rather, that you had not chosen him——"

"And yet you favoured his foster-brother, Mr. Discombe."

"Discombe had breeding and culture. Besides,

he had means ; he could give you position. This man has nothing."

"Excuse me, father, he has everything. Taffy is a man—strong, fearless, self-reliant, God-fearing."

Robert Leyland's lip curled for a moment. Then he walked to an easy chair and sat down.

"We will let the matter drop for to-day," he said. "To-morrow we may return to it again."

Taffy returned to Blakeney two days later with a very light heart. Robert Leyland had not given his consent, but he had granted a second interview and was much more amenable to reason than he was on the first occasion. He asked scores of questions, all of which Taffy answered without reserve. There was nothing in his life that he was ashamed of, and so he spoke freely of the past and the present and what he hoped to achieve in the future.

The most, however, Robert Leyland would concede was that if he ever did give his consent—and that was very unlikely—the marriage was not to take place for at least a year.

"I am willing to wait any reasonable time," Taffy answered, and so the interview ended. He little guessed, however, the changes that twelve months would bring.

CHAPTER XXXI

AS A MAN SOWETH

WHEN Robert Leyland discovered that no good came of his opposition, or was likely to come, he gave up opposing. In that he showed his common sense. He was disappointed, but not so disappointed as he might have been. He was not blind to Taffy's good qualities. The more he saw of him the better he liked him, but the fly in the amber was his humble parentage, his lack of public school and university training, and his poverty. The former considerations weighed more with him than the latter. A man might be forgiven for his lack of funds, but scarcely for his lack of pedigree. Robert Leyland was a proud man, and Taffy's social inferiority irked him greatly.

His common sense, however, came to his rescue. In this topsy-turvy world it was impossible to have everything, and since Taffy was a good fellow, with the instincts of a gentleman, he concluded that it would be wisdom on his part to withdraw his opposition.

Sheila was delighted. It meant the removal of the last cloud from her happiness. She could see Taffy when he came to London without fear or restraint; she could talk about him when he was absent. She was immensely proud of her humble, country-bred lover. She loved to contrast him with some of the anæmic but high-born youths who came within the circle of her acquaintance, loved to hear

him in argument with men who had enjoyed a thousandfold greater advantages than he.

Taffy rarely showed to better advantage than when discussing some social or political question. He was never aggressive, but, on the other hand, he always refused to be talked down. His sympathies were, naturally, with the class to which he belonged; he championed their cause wherever he might be with moderation and without bitterness. In Blakeney people had already begun to speak of him as a likely candidate at the next election; but Taffy pooh-poohed the idea—he had neither the time nor the money.

In the autumn Sheila paid another long visit to her uncle at Milor Hall. Like her father, Sir John had been terribly angry at first, but he was of too cheery a nature to nurse a grievance for any length of time.

"What can't be cured, Peggy, must be endured," he said to his daughter, with a laugh.

"But we need not have her here again," Peggy protested. "I think it is disgraceful of her."

"Tut, tut, Peggy; there's no disgrace in a girl having a sweetheart. Bless my soul, you would not think so if you had one," and he laughed again, his big, boisterous voice filling the room.

Peggy coloured to the tips of her ears and retorted hotly: "I should think it a disgrace to marry beneath me."

"Well, my dear, see that you don't do it," laughed Sir John, with a sly glance out of the corner of his eye, for he had long since come to the conclusion that there was not much chance of Peggy marrying at all. "That's what I say, see that you don't do it.

But as for Sheila—well, she may not be such a fool, after all,” and he laughed again.

• “Oh, father, how can you say such a thing; think of——”

• “Oh, yes, my dear,” he interrupted. “I have thought a good deal about it, and, hang me, the more I think of it the better I’m pleased. Our objection, after all, was sentimental nonsense and nothing else. I wouldn’t say so outside this room, of course, but it was—yours is still—pure snobbery when you get to the bottom of it. It wouldn’t do to say so in public, of course, but it’s fact all the same——”

“I’m surprised at you, father——”

“You needn’t be,” he went on. “It does us good to be brought down from our high horse sometimes and made to look at things as they are. There’s Taffy Longton, now—a plebeian, I suppose you would call him?”

“Of course I should.”

“Well, what does it amount to? Putting all sentiment aside, here’s your man, and six feet of jolly good stuff, too.”

“Oh, he’s good-looking, of course—nobody denies that,” Peggy interposed.

“Ay, but he’s more than that; he’s clean grit, and he’s brains into the bargain. Why, think of him. Is there another young man in the district that could have done what he has?—and there’s money in it, too, by all accounts. Bilkey, at the bank, was telling me the other day that it’s going to grow into a big thing. I shouldn’t be surprised if in a few years time Sheila isn’t able to look down on us all.”

“Well, let her, if she likes.”

"But she won't like. Sheila isn't that sort. Anyhow, I'm not going to growl at her any more, and when she comes down she'll be as welcome as the flowers that bloom in the spring."

For the moment, however, Sir John had overlooked the fact that in welcoming Sheila he would have to welcome Taffy also. When this was brought home to him he writhed a good deal. Prejudices die hard. The task would have been easier to both Sir John and Peggy if they had not known him all his life, and his parents before him.

He was just Taffy Longton to them, the son of a working farmer. Socially, they had never recognised him; he belonged to a lower order. Sir John felt grave, and looked it. He had praised Taffy in the abstract, as it were. To accept him in the concrete was quite another matter; and yet there was no getting out of it. It was the biggest camel he had ever been called upon to swallow, and he came very near choking.

Taffy was invited to dinner two evenings after Sheila arrived, and Taffy came—modestly, and yet with perfect ease and dignity.

It warmed the squire's heart to see the young people together, to see how proud they were of each other, to see the love-light that flashed from their eyes. It made him think of his own young days and of the romance that still remained a precious memory.

Peggy was very stiff and very critical. But Taffy was so happy in Sheila's presence that he did not notice it.

Later in the evening, when Peggy was alone with her father, and Taffy and Sheila were sauntering up

and down the drive in the moonlight, the squire looked up and said in a questioning tone: "Well?"

"He looks very handsome in evening dress, don't you think so?"

"You expected he would turn up in a lounge suit?"

"I really don't know what I expected; but I don't understand it all the same. If we hadn't known him all his life we might have thought he was a gentleman."

"But—it—he is a gentleman!" the squire cried fiercely.

"But it is puzzling all the same."

"Oh, no. Good manners are instinct in some men; besides, he is not the sort of man to keep his eyes shut."

"And then, of course, he goes to London every few weeks, and I suppose he stays at good hotels."

"Anyhow, you don't think Sheila has made such a mistake, after all?"

"It may turn out all right, of course. Anyhow, we will hope for the best," and with this concession she turned the conversation to another subject.

Meanwhile, Taffy and Sheila, arm in arm, were dreaming under the stars. The moon rode serenely through a dappled ocean of fleecy clouds, the shadows fell in fantastic shapes about their feet. How beautiful the world was! How beautiful life! Sheila, leaning on her lover's arm, was too happy to talk. She wanted nothing better than to be alone with him, listening to his voice and answering his questions with her eyes. She had always been

proud of him; she was doubly proud to-night. How handsome he looked; how bravely he had borne himself, breaking down, as she felt, the last remnant of opposition.

"Taffy," she said at length, with uplifted face, "I am not good enough for you; you are deserving of a better woman."

"Hush, sweetheart," he answered, kissing her on the lips. "You are the very best, and I shall never cease to wonder how I won you."

"I will try to be, dearest, what you hope I am."

"What I know you are, sweetheart. You will always be yourself; that is enough for me."

As the days and weeks passed away Sheila began to suspect, and not without reason, that Taffy was seriously neglecting his business, and laughingly told him so.

"Do I come to see you too often, sweetheart?" he questioned, with a grave smile.

"Too often, Taffy?" and she raised her eager face to his; "never too often, dear."

"Then I am quite happy," he laughed. "I can afford to take things easy for awhile."

So they rambled across the country and climbed the downs together, and rested in the shelter of the tors and recounted the story of the past. Bit by bit Taffy told her the story of his childhood and youth, of his struggles and hopes and ambitions, of the dawn of love, and how he fought against it. So they came day by day into closer union and to more intimate knowledge of each other.

The time of the year was autumn, and all around

them the finger of decay was busy. The yellow leaves lay on the roads and paths, and the west wind blew damp and chill across the fields. But they saw no fading splendour, felt no touch of cold. It was springtime with them, and the world seemed to grow more beautiful day by day.

Sheila went back to town for Christmas, and Taffy began seriously to set his house in order for the coming of his bride. He was determined that it should be as beautiful as love and his limited means could make it.

He had picked up a number of ideas in going up and down the country, and these he resolved to carry into effect. Sheila would not come to a mansion, but he was resolved that she should have as cosy and pretty a nest as any reasonable woman could desire.

He missed his long rambles and his wayside talks and the inspiration of her sweet, brown eyes, but he had his compensations. All his spare time he was planning for her, adding some fresh bit of furniture, searching for some coveted article; and all his thought was: "Sheila will like this, or I wonder if Sheila will approve of the other thing?"

One evening late in January he returned very tired from a long ride across the country. The day had been bitterly cold, with fierce splashes of sleet and hail, and a wind that nipped like frost. He had looked forward with great eagerness to his warm fireside and to the solace of a pipe. He was glad that he would have nothing to worry him for the rest of the day.

He rode rapidly up to Restal, and threw the reins to John Pinder, who was waiting for him. "Give the mare a good rub down, John," he said cheerily, and marched off to the house.

In the hall Honor stood ready to help him off with his coat.

"There's a man as 'as been waitin' for you the best part of an hour," she said deprecatingly. "I told him you was out, but he wouldn't go away."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, sir. He's a sort of a gentleman—that is, he ain't no workin' man; but he looks broke down, if I may say so, an' his clothes ain't warm enough for such bitter weather——"

Taffy did not wait to hear any more, but went at once into the dining-room. In an easy chair near the fire crouched the figure of a young man. His hair was dishevelled, his face pallid and drawn, his whole attitude that of utter dejection.

Taffy went at once and turned up the gas, then uttered an exclamation of surprise. His visitor had struggled feebly to his feet, and was facing him with parted lips and bloodshot eyes.

"Smut!" Taffy gasped, and leaned his hand on the table to steady himself.

The other nodded.

"But—but—what has happened?" he questioned, and he grew almost as pale as his visitor.

"Everything has happened—everything!" His voice was low and husky. Then he broke into a violent fit of coughing, and Taffy was by his side in a moment, fearing he would choke.

He recovered after a minute or two, and sank wearily back into the chair.

"You are not well, Smut," Taffy said sympathetically.

• "It's only the cough," was the reply; "it shakes me to pieces."

For awhile he sat still with closed eyes. Taffy looked at him and wondered at the change that had been wrought. His lips were almost livid, his cheeks grey and sunken, his hands not over-clean, his clothes ill-fitting and threadbare.

"I have been a long time in screwing up sufficient courage to come to you," Smut whispered at length, half opening his eyes and blinking at the light, "but the truth is, I have got to the far end," and he smiled pathetically.

"You mean——?"

"That I am broke, Taffy—absolutely broke. I have not a sixpence left in the world," and he began to cough again—a hard, racking cough, that shook him from head to foot.

Taffy hardly knew what to say or do. That Smut had played the fool and worse was only too evident, and, in the abstract, he had no sympathy with a man who squandered his substance at the rate Smut had done. On the other hand, Smut was his foster-brother, and he was ill, and for the moment the fact of his illness outweighed every other consideration.

"You must be hungry?" he said at length. "My housekeeper will be bringing in supper directly."

Smut shook his head slowly. "I have not been hungry for days," he said wearily; "I'm only dead beat."

"A warm bath and a good night's rest will set

you up," Taffy answered cheerfully. "But you will have something to eat first."

"No," and he shook his head again; "I only want to lie down."

It was nearly midnight when the doctor left. "I don't think he can possibly pull through," he said to Taffy, who stood with his shoulder against the mantelpiece by the dining-room fire. "How he managed to get here is a wonder."

"You will come again in the morning?" Taffy questioned.

"Early; and, if possible, I will bring a nurse with me."

Taffy bolted the door behind the doctor and went back to the bedroom and sat down by Smut's side.

"You will leave on the light when you go?" Smut questioned feebly.

"If you wish it," Taffy answered.

"I can't bear the dark; it is always full of faces—one face, rather. Do you believe, Taffy, that the dead can come back?"

"No."

"I do. I'm sure of it. I've seen her—there, don't take any notice of me, Taffy. I'm a little light-headed to-night."

"Had you not better try and get some sleep?"

"Not yet, Taffy. I'm not a bit sleepy; I'm only tired. I'd like you to sit here for awhile, if you wouldn't mind. You always were a good sort, and I've been such a rotter——"

"Better not talk about that now."

"Ay, better not. If you knew, you wouldn't have

me here. Mother wanted me to be a gentleman—God, if she only knew ! ”

“What are you talking about, Smut ? ”

“Was I talking ? I forget, sometimes. But thoughts will come in spite of everything. Money is a curse, Taffy. I know. It made me idle and wasteful—God, if I had never touched it ! ”

“But it was not your fault that you had money, Smut.”

“Not my fault ? ” and he looked at Taffy out of the corner of his eye. “Of course not. Nor my fault that I was born without moral courage—I did not make myself. I tried hard enough for a bit. I was proud once—— Oh, yes—I prated about honour till—— Taffy, when a man knows he’s a coward—that he hasn’t the strength of a fly—then he’s doomed.”

Taffy was silent. He knew that there was a measure of truth in what Smut said ; perhaps more truth than the sticklers for orthodoxy have ever conceded. It is easy for the strong to preach and to condemn ; but, after all, only God can gauge the measure of a man’s responsibility.

“Don’t you think talking tires you ? ” Taffy questioned at length.

“No, no ! I want to talk,” was the eager reply. “I’ve had nobody to talk to for months ; nobody but sharpers and thieves. Great Scott ! but I’ve gone the pace, Taffy.”

“But where’s your wife, Smut ? ”

He sat up in bed suddenly, with glaring eyeballs.

“In hell, I hope,” he said fiercely ; “in hell, with the other woman.”

"Hush, Smut; you should not say such things," Taffy replied quietly.

"Not say such things? You did not know her. She rooked me until I hadn't a stiver. If I had married a good woman I might have been saved—that is, supposing there is a good woman."

"Of course there are good women."

"I doubt it; and I've seen a good many. You are not married, are you, Taffy?"

"No."

"Then, take my advice and remain a bachelor. Women are the very—oh, I know. Enid was as pretty as they make 'em; delightful for a fortnight; with manners so sweet that—— Oh, great Scott!" and he lay back in bed as if exhausted.

"You had better give over talking now, and try to rest awhile," Taffy remarked, after a pause.

"Rest?" and his eyeballs glared again. "There's no rest for me, Taffy. I'm afraid that in the grave I shall not sleep. *She* doesn't sleep. There she is again, behind the curtains," and he raised his hand and pressed it over his eyes.

Taffy looked at his watch, then went and poured out his medicine and gave it to him.

For awhile he lay perfectly still. Taffy watched him with curious interest and wondered what tragedy lay behind that pinched and suffering face.

A little later he began to talk again, but wildly and incoherently; then, toward the early morning, he fell into a troubled sleep.

For several days he believed that he would get better, and he had dreams of starting life afresh on the other side of the world.

Taffy would help him, and with a fresh start under

new conditions he might win back all he had lost, and even restore to Taffy what he had taken from him.

Then suddenly, in some mysterious way—for no one had ever told him—he discovered that he would never get well again.

He was not startled nor in any way distressed.

"Taffy," he said that evening, "I want to talk to you. It will be my last opportunity."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE STORY ENDS

"BOLT the door, Taffy, so that no one can come in. What I say is for your ears only. It is curious how, when one comes to die, he wants to make a clean breast of everything. Mother did. You remember how she sent for me when she was dying?"

"I remember."

"She could not die quietly until she told me. Now it is my turn. I was her own son, Taffy. She changed us when we were little more than babies. You are Henry Discombe's son. The money was yours which I have squandered. I wonder you have never guessed."

Taffy sat still and stared, but did not reply. He saw everything as in a flash. He had half suspected before, and blamed himself for his thoughts. Now—as when the mists roll away from a landscape and the sun comes out—everything was clear.

"You are too astonished to reply?" Smut questioned at length.

"No, I am not astonished," Taffy replied quietly. "It is so obvious that I wonder I have not suspected. Perhaps, at the back of my mind, I have suspected—Aunt Jane knew?"

For a moment the blood rushed in a torrent to Smut's face, and he clenched his hands feebly above the coverlet. "Yes," he said, "she knew."

"I don't want you to tell me any more, Smut,"

he said, after a pause. "You cannot alter anything now."

"Yes, Taffy; I can give you back your name—your father's name. Bring Sir John—who is a magistrate—and the vicar here, and let me tell the truth to them. It is due to you."

"Names are nothing," Taffy said a little bitterly; "nothing can alter the past."

"Do not be harder on me than you can help," Smut said feebly, "though I think I know how you must feel."

Taffy did not reply for some time. He was thinking of his hard and arid youth, of his lack of education, of all the opportunities he had missed. The things he had coveted his poverty had denied him: the acquirement of knowledge, the companionship of books, the friendship of cultured people. He had longed to see the world, to loiter through foreign cities, to speak in different languages.

And all this he had been cheated out of by Smut and his parents. Nor was that all. The money his father had toiled to save, and which should now be his, had all been squandered—wasted in senseless speculation and riotous living.

For the moment he felt as though he could never forgive Smut, never speak civilly to him again. His conduct had been hateful, cowardly, contemptible, beyond anything he had ever known.

He wondered now that he had ever dared to come to his house. He felt himself that he would rather have died a hundred times than seek shelter at the hands of a man he had so cruelly wronged. It was adding insult to injury, piling wrong upon wrong.

He did not realise even yet to what depth Smut

had sunk morally and physically. He had not been near him to watch the swift decay of his manhood, the breaking loose from all restraints, the hopeless drifting from his early ideals.

He did not know of the remorse that seized him when he awoke to the moral significance of Aunt Jane's death, of the terror that haunted him night and day, of the hideous dreams that grew into realities.

Since that night in Trafalgar Square Smut had known no peace. A man of coarser texture might have gone his way untroubled; but Smut was weak rather than base. He had a conscience still. His stainless youth stood before him like an accusing sprite. The blood of his aunt cried to him from the ground. So he sought forgetfulness in the excitements of the Stock Exchange, the race-course, and the gambling den.

He won occasionally, as most gamblers do, but he lost tenfold more than he gained. His fortune melted like snow in summer-time; and when it was all gone his wife left him. She had got out of him all she could, piled up debts in all directions, and had never given him an hour's peace or affection in return.

She had her grievance, no doubt. He had let her think that his fortune was ten times greater than it was. She had married him for his money, as he ought to have known. She did not see that he also had a grievance; she was too selfish and superficial for that. She thought of no one but herself, and never tried to realise how chagrined he would be when he discovered that her fortune was *non est*.

He saw very little of her after their return to

London. She made friends of men he despised—and yet what could he say? If she broke loose from moral restraints, was not he doing the same? Could Satan rebuke sin? Must not the preachers of purity be pure themselves?

So he drifted a derelict upon London's roaring sea. He got credit where he could, borrowed when anyone was simple enough to lend him, pawned his few treasures when nothing else was left.

What he suffered during that hard and treacherous winter no one knew. He got an odd job now and then distributing circulars, addressing envelopes, or running errands. The people who had known him in better days, and helped to ruin him, passed him by. His companions were the flotsam and jetsam of London streets.

Perhaps it was some premonition of the coming end that turned his thoughts backward to the scenes of his early life, to his guileless and innocent childhood, to the brave, honest companion of his boyhood whom he had so cruelly wronged. The face of Taffy came up before him constantly. As he lay awake in model lodging-houses, too cold and hungry to sleep, he would think of Taffy.

Ah, how vain and foolish were all his parents' dreams; how vain and foolish his own. If he had only lived among the quiet fields, and been taught how to earn his own living, he might have lived a useful and happy life.

Taffy's money had been his curse. So warped and twisted had become his judgment that he sometimes blamed Taffy for all his misfortunes. It was not he who had wronged Taffy; it was Taffy who had wronged him. He had been a friend to Taffy;

he had saved him from the curse of gold, had kept him out of the way of temptation, had made life easy and honourable for him.

It was in one of these moods that he turned his back upon London and made his way by slow degrees into Devonshire. Generous people helped him along the road. It was easy to see that he had known better days. He had a plausible story to tell to all who would listen. So he moved from village to village and town to town, sometimes taking the train for a short distance, sometimes getting a lift in a farmer's cart, but mostly footing it along the frozen roads.

Mentally, he suffered less than might have been expected. Like most men who make shipwreck of their lives and drift into the gutter, he could always find excuses for himself. He laid the blame for his failure on other people—his wife, his financial friends, or, farther back still, his parents. He almost persuaded himself that he had been more sinned against than sinning. He was not bad at heart; he had been driven against his will into wrong courses; he had drank deeply, as better men had done, to drown the memory of the past. He dreaded most the long, dark nights, when he lay in casual wards or in somebody's barn. The darkness terrified him. He would hear that awful sound that he once heard in Trafalgar Square, see the distorted face of his aunt start out of the gloom, feel her cold fingers clutching at his hair. If he could only have forgotten her he would have faced cheerfully all the rest.

He watched Taffy's handsome face grow hard and cold as he sat silent by his bedside, but he was too

far spent to trouble himself much, though he would have been glad to excuse himself still.

• "I will ask the vicar to come and pray with you," Taffy said at length. "It is time you made your peace with God."

• "I am not afraid of God," Smut answered in a whisper. "He made me—He knows what I am, and how I have tried."

"Tried?" Taffy questioned scornfully.

"Yes, tried. You don't believe me, but I did try. When I came down to mother's funeral I meant to make a clean breast of it—at least, I did when I started. She had made me promise that I would say nothing until she was dead. But when I got to Crowdale and heard the vicar praise her, when I realised what I would have to give up, when I thought of exposing my mother's sin—Ah! and, Taffy, I wanted to win Sheila Leyland——"

Taffy started, and his face became crimson, but he did not speak.

"She would have made a man of me, perhaps, low as I had fallen. But her clear eyes saw through me. Yes, yes. She weighed me up. I sometimes think she guessed the truth. Do you ever hear of her, Taffy?"

"Yes! But go on with your story."

"If there is one good woman in the world, which I sometimes doubt, I think she is that woman. But, no matter, I have done with everything now."

"Not everything, Smut," Taffy answered more gently. "There is a life to come."

"But I shall not take my body with me, Taffy,

and when I am free from that I may be a better man. I have been asking God to give me another chance yonder, and I think He will."

Later in the day Smut told him the story of those sorrowful years since his mother's death, and Taffy's heart softened towards him. After all, Smut was only human, and the temptation had been very great.

To the vicar and Sir John Merton he repeated in full his mother's confession, and signed the document when it was written out.

Eliza Tamblyn, the old servant who gave the boys their nicknames, was sent for. She was quite positive on the question. It was Mr. Discombe's boy that she had nicknamed Taffy.

"Why, anybody could tell even now," she said, "who's who. Smut is a Longton all over."

And, indeed, nobody doubted when the story was made known. Dozens of people pretended to have been suspicious from the first, but had said nothing because the Longtons were such good people.

Taffy waited upon Smut to the last, read to him out of the old Book, and when the shadows became so deep that Smut could no longer see, prayed with him.

There were still compensations. Smut had robbed him of his fortune, and yet but for the loss of that fortune he might never have won Sheila; and Sheila was more to be prized than all the gold that men ever dreamed of.

"You forgive me, Taffy?" was Smut's last question.

"Yes, Smut; I forgive you."

"I can no longer see you, Taffy. Please pray with me."

So Taffy knelt down by the bedside and prayed. It was a simple prayer, and he choked more than once.

When he rose from his knees Smut lay with eyes closed quite still. Nor did he move again. Taffy watched by him all through the night. Just as the dawn was spreading itself faintly in the east his eyelids fluttered for a moment. He gave a long, weary sigh, and with that sigh his spirit went out to God.

They buried him as Robin Longton, with his father and mother in Milor churchyard. A crowd of people came, attracted by the story of his life and the tragedy of his death.

Taffy was the only mourner. Ned Jupp had married again, and considered himself no longer connected with the Longtons in any way.

People wondered at Taffy. His magnanimity was something they could not understand.

"I would have let the parish bury him," they said. "Think of it. He might have been a rich man but for——"

"He is a rich man," Ezra Bray interposed.

"Rich?"

"Aye, rich in what money can never buy! Rich in character! Rich in the love and admiration of everybody who knows him."

"But money is money for all that!"

"Aye, money is money! and what has it done for poor Smut?"

"And you are not sorry for Mr. Discombe?"

"Not I," Ezra answered cheerfully. "He'll make as much money as he wants—more, very likely. He's the better man for having had to struggle, and he's going to marry the sweetest girl in all England."

Sheila's pride in Taffy, which had been great before, went up a dozen degrees. She did not regret the loss of his fortune in the least, nor the loss of a university education.

"No university could have done for him," she declared, "what struggle and hardship and the stern forces of necessity had done. He might have had more book-learning, but oh!"—she added—"I am thankful he is what he is."

When Taffy learned that Sheila did not mind the squandering of his fortune he ceased to trouble about it. He had won the best, and what he had lost seemed little in comparison.

"I am glad your name is Ralph," Sheila said to him when he went to see her after Smut's death. "Robin was never a proper name for you."

"No?" he questioned with a laugh.

"You don't look like Robin, you know——"

"Why not?"

"For no reason at all. Only you don't. Isn't that sufficient?"

"If it is sufficient for you, sweetheart, it is for me," he laughed.

"You must never expect me to give reasons for anything," she said, pretending to look serious. "I'm a woman, you know."

"And so you can give no reason for promising to marry me."

"Oh, that is different," she laughed, blushing and pouting. "You are just you, and I love you; and oh! Taffy dear, I am so proud of you," and she hid her face in his shoulder.

"Dear heart," he whispered, "may we always be worthy of each other."

THE END

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